

1821
Safe

The Death of
PRESIDENT LINCOLN,

APRIL 15, 1865.

5 Feb 1864

The Death of President Lincoln.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED IN

ST. PETER'S CHURCH, ALBANY, N. Y.,

ON

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 19, 1865,

BY THE

REV. WILLIAM T. WILSON, M. A.,

RECTOR.

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1865.

CORRESPONDENCE.

ALBANY, *April* 19, 1865.

THE REV. WM. T. WILSON:

Dear Sir—The undersigned, members of the vestry of St. Peter's Church, having listened with deep interest to the very appropriate and impressive discourse delivered by you this morning, on the occasion of the funeral solemnities in honor of our late President, the lamented ABRAHAM LINCOLN, would earnestly request you to furnish them with a copy for publication; and in making this request, they beg leave to assure you they express not less the general feeling of the congregation than their own.

Very respectfully, your friends and parishioners,

ORLANDO MEADS,	JAMES KIDD;
JOHN TAYLER COOPER,	JOSEPH PACKARD,
JOHN TWEDDLE,	JESSE C. POTTS,
HARMON PUMPELLY,	WM. N. FASSETT,
MOSES PATTEN,	PHILIP TEN EYCK.

ST. PETER'S RECTORY, ALBANY, *April* 20, 1865.

GENTLEMEN:

In reply to your kind note, asking for a copy of the sermon preached by me yesterday at St. Peter's Church, in commemoration of our late President, ABRAHAM LINCOLN, I have only to say, that I very cheerfully comply with your request. The sermon is a simple and hurried one, yet I am glad to print it as a poor, but heartfelt tribute to the memory of a good man.

Yours very respectfully,

WILLIAM T. WILSON.

TO THE GENTLEMEN OF THE VESTRY OF ST. PETER'S.

Order of Divine Service.

THE DE PROFUNDIS:

“Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord.” — *Choir.*

SENTENCES FROM THE BURIAL OFFICE:

“I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

THE LESSER LITANY:

“O Christ, hear us.”

ANTHEM FROM THE BURIAL OFFICE:

“Lord, let me know my end and the number of my days.” — *Choir.*

LESSON: 1 Cor. xv, 20.

HYMN 130.

“Peace, troubled soul.” — *Choir.*

SERMON.

HYMN 201:

“Who are these in bright array?” — *Choir.*

PRAYERS FROM THE BURIAL OFFICE.

SENTENCE FROM THE REVELATIONS:

“I heard a voice from Heaven.” — *Alto Solo.*

BENEDICTION.

S E R M O N .

“THOU knowest not what a day may bring forth!”
What sad verification of the Wise Man’s words has just come to us! how sudden and appalling the disaster that has fallen upon the nation! Perhaps never before was the revulsion of feeling in a people greater; never before did a whole country pass instantaneously and at a single step from the height of exultation to the lowest depth of grief. These were to have been days of rejoicing. We were about to lift up our hearts in thanksgiving. All things conspired to make us glad. Victory, brilliant and unexampled, had just crowned our arms. The citadel of the Rebellion had fallen. That army which from the first had been its strong right arm had been shattered and taken. The nation’s flag floated once again over all the principal cities of the South. The season in which we celebrate the Lord’s Resurrection promised to be made memorable in our annals by the restoration of public order and unity

and peace. The national integrity had been vindicated in four years of gigantic strife. The drum-beat, the call to arms, had ceased. The long agony and sacrifice, and sword and flame of war, were over and done. The veterans of many a hard-fought field were turning their expectant eyes toward home. Glad hearts were yearning to go forth and meet them. The former days were to return. The sword was to be exchanged for the plough-share, and the pruning-hook was again to replace the spear. Surely, never were a people on the eve of a greater or more exultant joy!

But in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, by the hand of an assassin, the great joy is dimmed by a great grief. Far and wide over the whole land the shock of this disaster falls. Everywhere you see it reflected in pale and horror-stricken faces. The preparations of jubilee are turned into the preparations of bereavement. The draped and half-hung flags attest the affliction of the people. The triumphal procession gives way to the procession of mourners. The ovation becomes a funeral, and the *Te Deum* of victory sinks into the wail for the dead.

It is the contrast of a week! Thou knowest not what a day may bring forth! But yesterday, as it seems, and we were listening to the merry peal of

bells, and the boom of cannon, and the shouts of a multitude—and to-day it is the funeral knell and the minute-gun! A Nation sorrows for its great and honored Chief.

There is something strangely pathetic, strangely tragic, both in the time and manner of this great man's death. He had been spared to his country in the hour of her trial, in the agony of her threatened dissolution, in all her sad passage through the valley of humiliation, only to be taken away in the first dawn of her returning and added greatness. His had been the most fearful responsibility under which man had stood in modern times—responsibility which had furrowed brow and cheek with ceaseless cares and great anxieties—and he was barely permitted to taste the rewards of a faithful stewardship in the commendation of his countrymen and of the world. No other man was so identified with the national crisis in which he lived. The position he occupied made him its Representative Man. Events had forced upon him that responsibility in which the only alternative was an immortality of honor or an immortality of shame. Perhaps, brethren, even now, we cannot fully realize what these four years past have been to this weary and heavy-laden man. There is little or nothing in our own experience to

help us to it. However intense our interest in the struggle, ours has been only a private and individual responsibility. A nation's fate lay not in our keeping. Upon our every thought, and word, and deed, there has been no ceaseless and imposed constraint. How often has our speech been inconsiderate and rash! We were not forced to weigh it. There has been no fearful, consuming, never-ending care which brought us weary days and sleepless nights. But upon the heart of this one man the gathered burden of the Nation was laid. The destiny of his Country was in his keeping. Upon his wisdom, patience, firmness, integrity, forbearance, and self-control, what mighty issues hung! He lived in the crisis of an hour when his every act must reach on, in its effect, to generations yet unborn. I do not wonder that the painter of the great picture in the Rotunda, has given to that face a sad, and worn, and weary look. What man could front such constant and weighty responsibilities and not look sad, and worn, and weary? There must have been many hours in which he felt utterly alone, when the travail of his soul was in secret, when there was borne in upon him that bitter sense of solitariness which belongs to the Prophets of the Race, which must be the lot of those who are intrusted with the destinies of nations.

It is scarcely possible that we private citizens should ever be just, during life, to our great public men. We cannot put ourselves in their position; we cannot make the allowances that are due. It is so easy to criticise an act when the responsibility of that act is not brought home to you—so easy to overlook great qualities, and seize upon small defects of character. Sincerely and deeply as we all honor and mourn for him who is dead, perhaps there is no single one of us who has not at times spoken of him impatiently or harshly. I do not refer to this in the way of self-condemnation; in the confusions and perplexities of such a crisis it was almost inevitable; no life is free from its mis-judgments and mistakes, and your criticism and mine may or may not have been just—but perhaps we would not have made it, or made it more gently, had we been able to realize for ourselves all the trying anxieties of his position.

Yet it is one of the conditions of true greatness not to be dependent on prompt recognition or popular sympathy—to be content to labor and to wait. And he waited, as we see it now, with a magnanimous and wondrous patience. In the frequent and marked alternations of public feeling we have heard from him no murmur of complaint. And he is stricken down in the very hour when, without exception, and

without distinction of party, the sentiment of the whole country was clear in its recognition of his unswerving fidelity to his trust. Sweet, indeed, to ABRAHAM LINCOLN, would have been the cup which even now a grateful Nation had lifted to his lips. It is not in human nature for even true greatness to be indifferent to the refreshment of popular favor after it has borne the heat and burden of the day. It can do without it, if necessary, but it is none the less welcome when it comes. What a tragic taking-off, then, was this !

But the fact that the President did not live to reap the full measure of the Nation's applause is not that which is most pathetic in his fate. It is but simple justice to him to say that, far beyond all other thoughts, rose his pure and lofty patriotism. It is the endowment of large natures to be superior to personal considerations, and no one will deny that to the President's heart the salvation of his country was far dearer than the appreciation of his countrymen. He had led her through trial unparalleled in her history. Upon him had fallen the cares of four such years as she had never known. And, at last, after all the harassing vicissitudes of war he saw upon the mountains the shining feet of the Messengers of Peace. But he saw them only from afar. Like another leader

of another people it was not permitted him to pass over with his nation into the promised land. On the hither side his own steps were stayed. It was not given him to be the Chief Magistrate of a country once again at unity, concord, and peace. His own life was to complete that costly sacrifice which had been heaped up on her altars. A fate tragic and pathetic indeed!

He has passed into history. This is not the occasion or the place to vindicate or criticise the political principles that have marked his public life. Nor, even if it were fitting, would it be possible to make any fair and impartial estimate of him as a statesman now. After death we see men more as they really are, yet in the first hours of his decease, we cannot adequately do justice to the memory of a great public man. Time alone can give him his true place in the world's history. The future historian of this war will be also the historian of ABRAHAM LINCOLN. When the films of misconception and passion and prejudice have passed away, when there remains not a vestige of those partizanships from which no man in his generation can be ever wholly free, when the coming years shall have determined beyond appeal the real character of every issue that has been involved in the struggle, when in the calm

vision which distance brings, men see things and events in their just relations and proportions—then, and not till then, will the true biography of the President be written. The truest life stands in the closest relation to the present and to the future. Every man who aspires to be a leader among his fellows must be not only an interpreter of his own age, but also a herald of the age which is to come. He is so linked with his race that these conditions are involved in his work in the world. To the coming generation, then, it belongs to determine what the work of this man has been. Posterity is just. History is impartial. We need not fear to leave the reputation of the lamented dead with them. In some respects they may reverse or modify our judgments, but whatever position is assigned him among the benefactors of mankind, we cannot doubt that it will be a great and honored one.

But while not presuming to fix the position of the statesman, it is fitting that we should do homage to the personal worth and virtues of the man. That, at least, is a demand of the hour. It is not often that the pulpit can be used for a funeral eulogium. In this sacred place, where we come before God with the acknowledgment that we are all miserable sinners, one shrinks from anything that might seem

to savor of extravagance or adulation. We are reminded that the fairest human life, in God's sight, is not without its stain; that it must fall infinitely short of that high ideal which the Gospel has set before us. In the presence of the Lord, and in His holy temple, we would utter no undeserved, or forced, or unreal words. Yet there are times when, even in God's house, the tribute of praise in the recognition of human worth, is not only permissible but just. When dignity of public station is united to loftiness and purity of character, the homage should not be uncertain or reluctant that is spoken here. And yet on this occasion I can scarcely find words large and strong enough to render it. I can do but poor, brief justice to my theme.

How fully the moral virtues of the late President had commended themselves to the appreciation of his country, has its best witness in the unvarying tone of the popular press. I have looked in vain for any expression of detraction. The friends and the opponents of his administration have vied with each other in generous tributes to his memory. There has been something strangely touching and inspiring in the spectacle of these few days past—a whole people forgetting all political differences to unite in the recognition of moral worth. The fact is too significant to

be overlooked, that the qualities of the lamented dead which are foremost upon every lip, and which there is found none to dispute, are his simple and unvarying goodness, his incorruptible integrity of character, his purity and straightforwardness of purpose. These are not the most dazzling qualities, yet they are those which endear a man to his fellows. When all is over, we fall back upon them as the elements which must shape our estimate of his real worth. We admire brilliancy of intellect, but we have tears for the memory of the good. It is moral greatness which enshrines a man in the hearts of his countrymen, and vindicates at last its superiority to any other. And he was strong and patient; firm, yet gentle; just, but merciful. What that true, brave, earnest, unselfish life has been to the Nation in all these years of trial, perhaps we shall never fully know. Had his high trust been held by an unscrupulous and ambitious man, no imagination could picture all the horrors that might have been before us. But in the integrity of its Head, the Nation reposed with an implicit trust; amid all the stormy passions and cloudy bewilderments of the time, that shone out like a guiding star. Honesty was the quality which, whether in praise or depreciation, was always associated with his name; and, although honesty is not

all that is required of a leader, history is the witness that the most splendid endowments without that have never given to the world a life of true beneficence. An honest man, the poet says, is the noblest work of God; and the minister of God can select no moral character more worthy of his eulogium. Yes, our President was a simple, good, and honest man. In him we have lost what we could ill afford to lose. He has been called the purest public man of his day; and, however that may be, it is no disparagement to others to say that the death of ABRAHAM LINCOLN was an untimely death, an inscrutable dispensation of Providence, a great national disaster. We mourn for him as for an irreparable loss, as we have never mourned at the worst tidings of defeat.

Nor is this all for which we have to mourn. There is another cause for mourning, in which shame mingles with grief. Our annals have been defaced by what before had been to them an unknown crime. The country has been shocked, absolutely stunned, by its commission. Treason and rebellious war we had become familiar with. Even the wild barbarities of this strife we could find it in our hearts to pardon. But no man is found to palliate the assassin's foul and stealthy deed. I would not speak one word to stir in you any thought of vengeance. That were,

indeed, unfitting here. Rage is cruel, and impotent, and blind; and the worst that it could do would be as nothing in comparison with the guilt of the assassin. Let Justice hold the even tenor of her way, and let the Law exact the penalty of its own violation.

But there is another penalty, awful, inexorable, remorseless, which has come upon that guilty soul already, and which every succeeding age will take up and confirm. Two men have just entered upon an earthly immortality: the one as a Martyr of Liberty, beloved, honored and lamented, the other as the greatest criminal of modern times, upon whom are heaped a nation's execrations. Time will never take that burden off.

“The days will grow to weeks, the weeks to months,
The months will add themselves and make the years,
The years will roll into the centuries,
And his will ever be a name of scorn”—

Yes, forever a name of execration, infamy, and scorn. What an awful immortality is this! To be pursued from generation to generation by a people's endless curse; his very name a word of loathing even upon little children's lips! For him, as for the first murderer of the world, is not his punishment greater indeed than he can bear?

But while we stand aghast before his crime, let us remember that it is but a fearful manifestation of

that same sin which is common to us all. This should be a day not merely of mourning, but of humiliation. The possibilities of murder are in every heart. The spirit of Cain is in the race, and at a word it may blossom into crime in you and me. We are bound together in a mysterious fellowship of good and evil. This criminal, outcast and outlaw though he be, may yet claim kindred with us in a sad brotherhood of sin. There is no evil done under the sun in which, remotely, we have not our share. While, therefore, we execrate the crime, let us not forget to mourn, with tears and penitence, that sinfulness in ourselves and in the world, which has made such crime possible.

And with this thought we should be slow to charge complicity in it upon others. It is far too dreadful, too awful, too diabolical, for light or indiscriminate accusation. We would fain believe, even against evidence, if it must be, that no leader of the rebellion could incite or approve of such a damning deed. Still less should it embitter our feelings towards the people of the South. They have proved themselves desperate rebels and traitors, it is true, but they have proved also their gallantry on many a stricken field, and men who rush undaunted upon the cannon's mouth, and bare their naked breasts to the glittering steel, are not the men who make or countenance assassins.

I have already spoken of what seemed so tragic and pathetic in our President's death. How could it be otherwise than hard, after all this care, misrepresentation, and apparent defeat of fame, to be stricken down in the moment of his triumph, and in the hour of his country's awakening and grateful recognition? Yet, in another and deeper reference, his death was not so untimely as it seems. Never, perhaps, could he have been better prepared to be summoned into the presence of his Maker. In Republics, as in Kingdoms, rulers reign by the grace of God. Their responsibility is not only to the people. There is another tribunal before which they must give account of their stewardship, and answer for the things that they have done. To that tribunal ABRAHAM LINCOLN has passed, not in an hour of pride, not in a mood of vindictiveness, not in the darkness of revenge; but "when," in the eloquent tribute of a political opponent, "all his thoughts were concentrated upon peace, and when his heart was full of purposes of mercy." *Sic semper tyrannis!* was the shout of the assassin, as he brandished his weapon before a horror stricken crowd after he had done that dastard deed. Ah! poor, counterfeit, and painted passion. Foul, false, and slanderous word! It dims not the glory that settles on that bowed and bruised head! Most merciful of victors, the world will never

couple "tyrant" with thy name! Thine was not the ambition of a Cæsar to purchase thy self-exaltation with thy country's loss! The people of thy deliverance will suffer no aspersion to rest upon thy fame, and in its indignant refutation history will lay the foundation of thy great renown!

No! the reputation of the dead President is not stained by one single act of tyranny. If ever revenge may be excusable, it might have been in him. From the hour of his inauguration he had been engaged in a life and death struggle with the nation's foes, and sometimes the struggle seemed to go hard against him. Yet the moment the assurance of victory was unalterably his, he showed a true Christian magnanimity, a marvelous and generous forbearance. In word or deed there is no trace of meditated vengeance. A true father of his country, he went forth with compassion and tears and gladness to meet his erring but scarce repentant sons. And he himself was called into the presence of the Great Father "when all his thoughts were concentrated upon peace, and when his heart was full of purposes of mercy." Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God; blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Let that be his epitaph! We listen eagerly to catch a great man's dying words. But, in the hour before his death, the President was

silent and sad. And after the fatal messenger had sped, he died and made no sign. We must seek the moral of his life, not in a phrase, but in his crowning purpose of beneficence. The face, they say, after death, was clothed with a sweet and strange serenity. May we not believe that he who sought peace so earnestly, had found peace, yet not the peace he sought? The peace which the world cannot give. The peace that passeth understanding. The peace which is won through conflict, and which comes as the reward of faithfulness in that. The peace which Christ alone giveth. Such peace as He gave to His disciples, when, showing them His stricken side, and holding up His wounded hands, He said: "*My* peace I give unto you!"

Brethren, how can we better honor the memory of the dead than in the reflection of his own great charity—the fulfillment of his own beneficent designs? This is no hour for muttered vengeance. This is no time for ruthless retribution. It would be a stroke more cruel even than the blow of the assassin to inaugurate a reign of terror with his burial, and offer a holocaust of human victims at his tomb. Peace and Mercy! is not this the legacy, the watchword he has left us, with which to go forth and meet a vanquished, yet kindred, foe? Such mercy as may

be consistent with the safety of the Republic; and such peace as may lay deep and broad again the foundation for a free, restored, and reunited People.

And in our bereavement, let us not forget to discern the finger of God, to recognize His Fatherly correction. It requires no little effort to bring ourselves to think of our affliction thus. Our first and almost irresistible impulse is to view it simply as an unmitigated disaster. Yet there is no failure and no loss in the economy of the infinite Wisdom. We cannot doubt that in the permission of that deed God had a wise and far-reaching purpose. We cannot tell what it may be, but we know that it is always His to overrule evil for good. Perhaps it was to chasten, in these first hours of triumph, a too arrogant and exultant joy. Perhaps it was to secure us from the immoderation of victory, and lead us to wait humbly upon that Providence from whom all victory comes. Perhaps it was to deepen our devotion to our country, by this final and crowning sacrifice which the preservation of her integrity has cost. It would seem that the nation must grow as does the church, from the seed sown in the martyr's blood. That this visitation has softened men's hearts strangely, we ourselves can see. Not since the commencement of this sad war has there been such unity

of feeling. It is no partizan spirit that has draped the land in habiliments of woe. Party lines and animosities seem for the time to have ceased, and we are again a great people, reunited in a great grief.

Let the pure, unselfish patriotism of the honored dead be unto us a lesson teaching by example! Let it animate and inspire us! Let us cherish in our hearts, and strive to realize in our lives, a true Christian patriotism — not merely the patriotism which is a civic virtue, but the patriotism which is a religious duty! May we grow in faith and love and devotion to the Nation. May we hold it as the goodly heritage which we have received from our fathers, and which we are to transmit to our children. May ours be the cheerful, willing, holy self-sacrifice, if for further sacrifice there should be any call, which should become the Christian patriot, which should belong to the Christian citizen. In prayer, and the strength which comes of prayer, we may do the work that has been given us to do. Then shall this fair land, this continent guarded by the mountains and girded by the seas, become the heritage of our children and of our children's children — its laws respected, its authority inviolate, the integral unity of its territory unimpaired, stable in the righteousness that exalteth a nation, and under the majesty of

a flag which droops upon no field — symbol of power and purity — the home of Freedom, the home of Justice, and the home of Peace!

As for our dead President, his work is done. Care shall furrow brow and cheek no more. That great heart is bowed no longer beneath the affliction of his people. The long weariness is over and past. The sad face is calm and still and untroubled now. Even as we speak they are bearing him to the long home and the narrow house — they are reading at the Nation's Capital the burial service for the dead — earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dust to dust; looking for the general Resurrection and the life of the world to come. Yes! the life of the world to come. Let us comfort one another with these words! Not vainly do these yet unwithered Easter flowers hold their place amidst all the drapery of grief. They symbolize an immortal hope, the triumph over death and the resurrection from the dead. The faithful servant, we may trust, hath entered into the joy of his Lord. Let us leave him to his rest — the blessedness of them who rest from their labors!

