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A
D I S C O U R S E
IN FAVOUR OF THE
A B O L I T I O N , O F S L A V E R Y
IN THE
B R I T I S H W E S T I N D I E S .

Preached on the First Sunday in Lent, in the Parish
Church of Ware, Herts.

BY THE REV. W. HUGHES, M. A.

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D I S C O U R S E, &c.

ISAIAH, lviii. 6.

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burthens, and to let the oppressed go free?

THERE is harmony in all the works of God; and whether we consult the volume of nature, or of revelation, we discover it equally in each. Though in the gradual display of the divine will, that light only dawns forth in the law, which, in the gospel, breaks out with brighter lustre; yet the Old Testament, as well as the New, affords strong internal proofs of its celestial origin: and the resemblance, which is discoverable be-

tween the two dispensations, in some important instances, may be considered as an evidence of their having both proceeded from the same author, the Father of Mercies. In both revelations, mercy, justice, and truth are considered as the weightier matters of human duty; and the same disregard of external rites and observances is expressed in both, when they are not accompanied by those virtues, which they were intended to produce. “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me?” said the Almighty to the children of Israel. “Your hands are full of blood.”—“I fast twice in the week, I give tythes of all that I possess,” said the proud Pharisee in the Gospel. Alas! to what purpose? Without, indeed, all was fair and beautiful as a whited sepulchre; and, like that too, all within was foulness and corruption. In the words of the text also, works of mercy are emphatically preferred to the instrumental parts of religion: and no wonder, since the former are to be considered as the end, and the latter only as the means of becoming

religious: but if the means produce not the end, where is their use? They can only serve hypocrites to delude themselves and others. They plainly had this bad effect on the Jews; and the Prophet severely reprehends the insincerity of their professions, pretending, as they did, to be religious, when they refused to yield obedience to the benevolent injunctions of their law, which required them to give freedom to their Hebrew servants every seventh year. Nor is this the only passage in the Old Testament, in which the comfort and happiness of those is consulted, who, from the nature of their situation, must have been peculiarly liable to hardship and ill usage: the scriptures abound with many others; though it pleased the Divine Wisdom, not wholly to abolish involuntary servitude at that time, but to mitigate the evil, and render it tolerable to those to whose lot it fell. Much more deplorable was the condition of slaves among the Gentiles, protected, as they sometimes were, by no laws either divine or human. Who can read, without horror and

indignation, the accounts which are given of the treatment which they received under the Roman government? Nations the most polite and civilized seem to have improved in the arts of cruelty, in proportion as they learned to excel in those arts that adorn human life: their greatest enjoyments and most exquisite pleasures have arisen from the contemplation of human misery. Melancholy proof of the depravity of the heart of man! A shew of gladiators was the favourite amusement of a Roman assembly; and the unhappy victims were required, by their unrelenting tyrants, to resign themselves to torture or to death, as either best suited the caprice of the moment*. Such were the horrid practices which disgraced a most wise and refined people amongst the ancient Heathens: till at length the gospel was published to the world, the fun of righteousness arose, and such cruelties and oppressions.

* Two thousand gladiators, who were either slaves or prisoners, have been seen at once on a Roman theatre, expiring or dead.

as had long been a reproach to human nature, with other works of darkness, vanished from before it. And it might reasonably have been expected, that wherever Christianity is professed, the iniquitous custom of committing their fellow-creatures to perpetual slavery, so utterly inconsistent with its spirit of mercy and benevolence, would never have revived: but alas! the evil not only prevails in some of our foreign settlements, but has also its abettors and defenders even in this land of liberty. And what practices are so infamous as not to have found advocates in those who are interested in the commission of them? What crimes are too shocking for men to commit, when impelled by the thirst of gain*? There are advocates, not only for the continuation of slavery, but even for the legality of it, who assert that slaves are as much the property of their possessor as any thing else can be;

*— Quid non mortalia pectora cogis

Auri sacra fames?

VIRG.

they are his by right of purchase. Not to mention that this kind of traffick is contrary to natural law, and to every law under heaven, has any one a right to purchase that of another which he is conscious is not the property of another? In such a case, the purchaser is to be considered as an accomplice with the thief. This rule holds good in the present case. The wretched African, before he is exposed to sale, has either been stolen away from his parents and his native country, or at least has been unjustly deprived of his liberty, by fraud or violence: To those who have lamented the barbarous treatment of the negro slaves, it has been answered, that it is contrary to the interest of the planter to correct beyond measure, or to shorten the lives of his slaves by ill-usage. Are not men daily incited, either by folly, caprice, or ill-humour, to do those things that are contrary to their interest? Let any one reflect on the condition of those animals that are most serviceable to man, when it is their misfortune to be the property of one who "regardeth not the

life of his beast, but whose tender mercies are cruel." The case of the African slave is exactly similar; his comfort or misery depends entirely on the disposition of the master whom he happens to serve; the will of the tyrant is, in the strictest sense of the words, the law of the slave. Is it possible for human nature to be in a more abject state? And shall we then, who make our boast of the blessing of liberty, become the base advocates of the vilest and most intolerable slavery? Shall any political or interested motives induce us thus to trample on the sacred laws of nature? Shall we, who call ourselves Christians, thus dare to violate the precepts of our holy religion? It has been alledged, that there are planters who treat their slaves with a degree of humanity, and even with tenderness: the truth of this fact will be admitted with pleasure: but in the name of reason and common sense, shall slavery be continued, because in some few, very few instances, the misery of the slave is not extreme? Artful and malicious insinuations have been thrown out, that the

natives of Africa have a degree of understanding little superior to that of brutes, and still less feeling. The ingenuity of the writings of those who have accidentally received some small share of education amongst us, is a sufficient confutation of the first part of the charge; and their sensibility is generally allowed to be quick and lively to a great degree; as, indeed, sufficiently appears from their expressions of grief and agony when in a state of captivity. It has been urged as an unanswerable argument in behalf of slavery, that if it be an evil, it is, in the present case at least, a necessary evil; since without the continuance of it, and the constrained labour of these miserable beings, certain luxuries, now in general use, could not be procured. Perish every luxury that the earth produces, sooner than so many of our fellow-creatures should be doomed to perpetual and irremediable misery*. Shall

* It has been computed that one hundred thousand slaves are annually exported from Africa to the British West Indies, and to America, vast numbers of whom perish every year, through the cruelty of their task-masters.

this man riot in all the excesses of voluptuousness? Shall every exotic delicacy be procured, and all nature be ransacked for his delight? And shall another, who by his labour hath administered to the pleasures of the former, taste nothing but the cup of bitterness? Assuredly there is a luxury far superior to that of gratifying the palate; and he who can enjoy the divine pleasure that arises from the relief of misery, from loosing the bands of wickedness, and letting the oppressed go free, will not much lament the loss of other gratifications*. But the fact, that certain luxuries

* Some have declared it as their opinion, that the situation of the whites would be extremely dangerous, if the blacks were to be emancipated: whereas it seems reasonable to suppose that the reverse would be the case. The immediate effect of such emancipation and abolition of the slave-trade would be, that the proportion of blacks would begin to decrease, till the poor creatures were allowed to marry without restraint, and to bring up their children; and their desire to injure the whites, it may be supposed, would no longer exist, when they found themselves treated as men, and not as brutes. Our worthy countrymen, the planters, have an additional security in the protection of a body of regular British troops; and what more easy than to forbid the blacks the use of fire-arms, at least for a time, even after they have been declared free? There remains not the shadow of an argument, nor can any one with any consistency countenance these blackest deeds of hell, unless he openly acknowledges that his profession of Christianity is a mere farce, and that the only thing worthy of the consideration of a reasonable being, is, how he shall be able to amass the greatest possible quantity of wealth. Whom then shall we serve, God or Mammon? for that is the only question.

must be relinquished, if slavery were to be abolished, must not be admitted, for it is not founded in truth. To endeavour to persuade the world that it is so, is one of the artifices of those sons of Mammon, who can only feel for themselves, and for their own interests. There can be no doubt that moderate wages and kind treatment would induce a sufficient number voluntarily to continue those services which are at present compelled. To those who are the sincere friends of religion, the evil of this most cruel of all slavery must appear to be greatly aggravated by the consideration of the impossibility of converting men to the Christian faith under such circumstances: the very attempt would be absurdity and mockery. In what terms should such an audience be addressed? Will you tell them, that you wish to save their souls, while you torment their bodies? that it is your most earnest desire to make them eternally happy hereafter; and as a proof of your sincerity, render their existence miserable here? Will you tell them, that, as bound by the laws

laws of your religion, you consider and love all men as your brethren, and convince them of the warmth of your affection with whips and scourges? Is it thus the glad tidings of "peace upon earth, good-will towards men," which were first ushered into the world with the songs of angels, are to be announced? Are these the means by which Christ's religion is to prevail and become universal throughout the world? Having examined the principal arguments which have been made use of by the advocates of slavery, and shewn their futility; let us now take a view of the real condition of those who have been so unfortunate as to be reduced to that state in our West India islands. Consider them, in the first place, torn by violence from their native country, and from all that endears human life, from their friends and relations (for they too have their connections, they too are men), and carried away captive to some strange land, they know not whither: if they escape the dangers of the sea, they are then publicly exposed and sold, though guilty of no crime;

thus

thus condemned to the most humiliating condition to which human nature can be reduced. To behold these hapless creatures, toiling night and day that the earth may produce those fruits which they are doomed not to enjoy*; their bodies ill-defended from the inclemencies of the weather; “hungry and thirsty, their souls fainting within them,” unmercifully beaten for trifling offences, nay, tormented by all the studied arts of malice, and often put to a cruel and lingering death! To behold these calamities, and to reflect that they were brought upon the sufferers by those who boast that the image of God is impressed upon them! Who is not ashamed of his nature? Merciless tyrants! how is it that your atrocious crimes have not brought down the vengeance of Heaven upon a nation that has so long suffered such inhuman practices to prevail? But perhaps

* Negroes are so far from enjoying the choicer fruits of the earth, that they are not allowed a sufficiency even of necessary food. “In Barbadoes,” says a respectable writer, “and some other of the islands, six pints of Indian corn and three herrings are reckoned a full week’s allowance for a working slave.” A. BENEZET.

they have done so. Is it unreasonable to suppose that the evils which we at present lament and suffer, the consequences of a fatal and successful war, may be inflicted on us for our manifold transgressions, and in particular for our unchristian neglect of the cruel treatment of these our distressed brethren, "in that we saw the anguish of their souls," and did not attend to their complaint*. Nothing that has been now said on the subject of this cruel slavery, has been wilfully exaggerated or misrepresented: suffer me then, my brethren, to plead for the miserable. It is the cause of humanity; it is the cause of heaven. But your liberality, already proved on former occasions, sufficiently urgent, though of less moment than the present, renders it almost unnecessary now to supplicate your benevolence. Your hearts are alive to the feelings of

* To those who will allow that the Supreme Being may inflict national punishments for national crimes, and who seriously consider what we have been guilty of, in countenancing the most horrid and barbarous scenes that the world ever beheld, the above passage may not appear to be the very height of folly and fanaticism.

humanity, and your hands are open to relieve the wretched. And lo! a dawn of hope appears. The cry of the afflicted is heard. May it obtain relief from those who are impowered to grant it*; that the abject slave, the poor, insulted, afflicted, and dejected African may be released from his bondage, and restored to an equal enjoyment of the privileges of human nature. All good men, who take this matter into consideration, must concur in their most earnest wishes for so desirable an event. All Christians are bound to do so†; and should their kind endeavours “in this labour

* There is great reason to hope for success; some of the first characters in the kingdom are known to favour the cause; in particular a most worthy prelate of our church, the present Bishop of London, has nobly distinguished himself as the friend of man.

† A society of Christians, known by the appellation of Quakers, ever remarkable for the harmlessness of their manners, and the mild benevolence of their dispositions, have deserved the highest praise, have acquired the greatest glory, by their steady perseverance and unabating zeal, in a cause which reflects so much honour on the Christian name. It is earnestly to be wished that Christians of every denomination would follow their example of philanthropy, and, forgetting their animosities and disputes on subjects concerning which, men, as heretofore, ever will, in all probability, hold different opinions; instead of contending who shall most expose to the world his own want of charity and ill-breeding, contend only who shall do most good to mankind.

of love", be crowned with success: millions yet unborn would bless the generous and charitable efforts of the British nation; and, in some more auspicious period, may be induced to embrace the Christian faith, and to believe, that it is indeed a religion of love and mercy, when they perceive that such have been the fruits of it. O thou benevolent Creator of all things, merciful Father of Nature, who first madest man that thou mightest communicate to him a portion of thy happiness; look down with pity on the abject state of this part of the human species, thus degraded from the rank which thou hast appointed man to hold amongst the works of thy creation. Let it be thy will to give freedom to those who are in captivity. Melt the hearts of their oppressors into tenderness and compassion. And, for the sake of him who gave his life a ransom for sinners, grant that the whole human race

may be delivered, as from temporal, so also from spiritual bondage, “into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”

F I N I S.

