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Johny F. Allen
May 1876
The Duties of Churchwardens and of
Parishioners.

A CHARGE

DELIVERED TO THE

CHURCHWARDENS & SIDESMEN

OF THE

ARCHDEACONRY of MAIDSTONE,

At the Ordinary Visitation

IN APRIL & MAY, MDCCCLXXVI.,

BY

BENJAMIN HARRISON, M.A.,

ARCHDEACON OF MAIDSTONE.

REPRINTED FROM THE "KENTISH GAZETTE."



A CHARGE.

It is not my intention, on the present occasion, to detain, by an address of any length, my brethren of the Laity whom I have the satisfaction of seeing before me, cited by due authority to make their reports, embodied in their presentments, or otherwise, on the matters which come under their cognizance as churchwardens of the several parishes; or to make the declaration which will qualify them to execute the office of Churchwarden or of Sidesman. At the same time there are one or two topics on which I think it may be useful, under present circumstances, to say a few words; or in regard to which the churchwardens elect may be glad to have their hands strengthened, it may be, in some degree for the more satisfactory discharge, among their fellow parishioners, of the duties devolving upon them.

I would express, in the first place, in regard to the office of churchwarden—an office highly important and of great utility to the Church—the satisfaction and thankfulness which I feel that we have, thus far, experienced in so slight a degree the difficulty which might have been anticipated, under the altered circumstances of late years, in finding men willing to

undertake the office, with the trouble, and sometimes the annoyance, attending it. Our most Reverend Diocesan, at the opening of his Primary Visitation at Maidstone, four years ago, in the first of the seven Addresses which he delivered, in the course of that Visitation, to the clergy and churchwardens of his diocese, expressed his desire "to press upon the laymen who were" then "present," how truly important their duties as churchwardens were; and that, "if there ever was a time when" those duties "were important, they are so now. There is," said his Grace "in some respects more difficulty than there was formerly in obtaining persons to hold the office of churchwarden, because the secular advantages which the administration of the public property conferred have disappeared." "We are thrown more than we were formerly," his Grace went on to say, "upon our own resources, in other words, we are thrown more than we were upon the loyalty of those who desire the welfare of the Church and of Christ's people; and we feel," said the Archbishop, "that we shall not look to them in vain to discharge those duties which belong to their office, though circumstances have made them much more difficult to perform, and less attractive. I trust, therefore, that the churchwardens of this diocese will answer freely to the call that is made upon them; and that no one will ever think of refusing the office, when he feels that it is a means of doing good for Christ's sake and Christ's people." In another Visitation Address, delivered at Canterbury to the Rural Deaneries of Canterbury, Ospringe, Westbere, and Sittingbourne, the Archbishop observed, "As to my brethren the churchwardens, some of them have stated that they have great difficulty in performing their duty; and that, in consequence of recent legislation which has altered the right of collecting money from church-rates, their churches are not in the good order in which they desire to see them. Let me impress upon them," said his Grace, "the absolute necessity of their taking some steps

for the full performance of their duties. It is the condition of all of us from time to time"—I continue my quotation from the Archbishop's address—"to find ourselves in a new position in consequence of alterations of the law. Our business is, of course, as soon as possible, to adapt ourselves to that changed state of things, and to find some substitute for what has passed away. Now with regard to the maintenance of our services and churches in proper order, two modes," said the Archbishop, "may be suggested: one is to levy a voluntary rate, which no doubt will readily be paid; and the other is to have offertories in the churches, appropriated to the purposes which church-rates formerly served. It will not do to say that the law is altered, and therefore that everything must take care of itself. That the law is altered, this is the very reason why we should exert ourselves, and see that some substitute is provided for that which, by the action of the law, has been taken away from us. I thoroughly believe," the Archbishop proceeded to say, "that the laity of the Church of England are determined not to allow their churches to fall into ruins, or their worship to be conducted in a slovenly manner. Before another Visitation," said his Grace,—"and I wish to call special attention to this statement or anticipation,—“some mode will be found which, by appeal to the voluntary allegiance of those who love their Church, and are ready to advance its interests, will fully supply the lack of that which has disappeared. The duties of the churchwardens in this matter are plain; and they are important; and they bear very much upon the maintenance of religion. Without these outside signs that our religion is flourishing, inward and spiritual religion will suffer loss. I fear that the heart of religion will be injured, if injury befall the churches which are the enduring ornaments of our land.”

I have thought it well to recall to mind to my brethren and the churchwardens of my archdeaconry, these utterances of the Diocesan at his Primary Visitation, because the time is come round, with this

year, when the Archbishop, inhibiting for the time the exercise of the jurisdiction belonging to the subordinate and concurrent Ordinary (the Archdeacon) takes into his own hands, at his Visitation, the plenary authority and duty of inquiring into these matters. And it would be well, in view of this, and in order that the Diocesan's dealings with these questions may be the more satisfactory, that the churchwardens, in their several deaneries and parishes, should be prepared to make such representations as they may think fit in regard to difficulties which they may have met with, and to offer such suggestions, or express such opinions as they have formed, in respect both to the obstacles which stand in the way of the full performance of their office and the remedies to be found for existing evils. With reference only to one trifling item of parochial liability which I may specify in this connexion—I mean the fees customarily paid at the Visitation—and I may well call it a trifling item, since it amounts in this diocese only to ten shillings, I may observe that I have before now heard it stated, as a reason for nonpayment by some parish or other, that the churchwardens have “no funds.” As regards this particular point, you are aware, probably, that there is a Bill now before the House of Lords, brought in by the Archbishop of Canterbury, intituled the “Ecclesiastical Offices and Fees Bill,” which, I hope, may lead to some adjustment, and put an end to all dissatisfaction and unpleasantness on this subject. The Bill was referred, upon the second reading, to a Select Committee; and a considerable amount of evidence has been given by very competent witnesses. If, by the substitution of fixed salaries to be paid to the legal officers concerned, in place of fees, or by a system of stamps, the door is closed upon any question arising at the Visitation, I, for one, shall be heartily glad. But I earnestly hope that the Bill, when it comes from the Select Committee, will contain no such provision as it contained when it went thither, for a fee of five shillings to be paid by every churchwarden on the certificate of his

election by the vestry—a payment for which he was to be personally liable, and which he was to be left to recover from the parish. I have before now explained that it is an entire misapprehension to regard these customary payments from the several parishes as fees payable by the new churchwardens in order to their admission to their office. That idea is, I must repeat, an entire mistake. The newly-elected churchwarden is presumed to have no knowledge whatever of parish accounts, and no responsibility in regard to them. The payment is one that is by custom, and now by law, due from the parish, for the remuneration, mainly, of the legal functionaries acting as registrars, or others, for the services they render in reference to matters of law and the business of the Visitation, such as the issuing of notices, filing of parochial registers, and the like; and it would be in fact stereotyping a common error, and throwing an additional difficulty in the way of men's undertaking the office of churchwarden, if they were now for the first time charged with this payment, for which they are to be made personally liable, and look to the parish for reimbursement. Such legal officers there must be, as the Archbishop stated in the House of Lords; there must be a regular system of registration of legal acts and procedures; if there is to be any discipline in the Church, in its complex relations with the whole system and order of the country on which, as Englishmen in general strongly feel, the Church of Christ, established by God's good providence within the borders of our land, confers so great and manifold blessings. I may venture to add also, that I heartily trust that no propositions will be adopted, in regard to the mode of admission of churchwardens to their office, which will disturb or set aside the ancient arrangements, still in force, in connection with the ordinary Visitation. Questions oftentimes arise out of proceedings at parish vestries, contested elections, and the like, which would be far more likely to perpetuate strife and party feeling, if they were to be fought out, "to the bitter end," in

the parish, than if the question is referred, as at present, to the Archdeacon and his visitation court, and thereby, as instances have not been wanting among ourselves, quietly adjusted in due course, and peace and good will preserved among fellow parishioners. There are, moreover, I need hardly remind you, questions constantly occurring, in regard to which it is highly important—if we are to prevent “the beginning of strife” which, as the Wise Man tells us, “is as when one letteth out water”—that there should be duly constituted authorities, with the means and appliances of professional knowledge available, to prevent false steps being taken which may, perhaps, not easily be retraced. I trust that the result of the measures now under consideration may be such a union and distribution of ecclesiastical offices, and such arrangements for their due remuneration, as may secure efficiency, and not simply effect destruction; providing, indeed, as is desirable, for the abolition of any useless offices, or a needless division of labour, but taking care, at the same time, not to cure one evil, as is sometimes done, by creating a greater; devising, machinery which will not work, or crippling that which needed, rather, strengthening and completing. I trust, also, that no provision to be made for legal functionaries of whatever degree, may operate in the way of trenching upon funds at the disposal of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, available for their general purposes, the increase of small livings. The whole matter will, I doubt not, be very fully and carefully considered by the select committee of the House of Lords, of which the Archbishop has been chosen Chairman.

The payment, however, of fees to diocesan officers even as it exists among us at present, forms, as I have said, but a small item, comparatively, of the amount which by some means or other, ought, as our Diocesan has told us to be provided in the several parishes for the repair of the fabric, and the maintenance of divine service. It can never be regarded by any body of parishioners as fair or just when the matter is brought fully and clearly before them, that a

churchwarden should be called upon to expend money out of his own pocket, while his fellow parishioners stand by and look on selfishly or carelessly. It is surely enough that the churchwarden should gratuitously bestow his time and trouble, in administering the funds to be contributed by the whole parish, or, at least, by faithful members of the Church. And therefore it is, that, under this conviction of the substantial right feeling and good sense of Englishmen, when properly appealed to, I am desirous, having in mind the Archbishop's words, at his Primary Visitation, which I have with this view distinctly referred to, that before he comes among us on his second Visitation, the churchwardens elected and to be admitted now to their office, should take counsel one with the other, if need be, in their several parishes, and also with the clergyman, and take steps to obtain, if necessary, the effectual establishment of some satisfactory and adequate provision. In the majority of the parishes in this archdeaconry, I believe, a voluntary church-rate is made; but I have reason to think, there is in many cases a difficulty in collecting it. There is, now, as you are aware, no power of enforcement—no provision for *compelling* an unwilling parishioner to pay. This is simply what the law has done—it was an act for the abolition of *compulsory* church-rate. It did not abolish church-rate—a point which the late lamented Earl of Romney took occasion often to point out: it simply prevented a churchwarden from bringing a reluctant parishioner before the magistrates, and obtaining a distraint on his goods. And this was, indeed, practically so obnoxious a proceeding, that, if the churchwardens of the present time are entitled to our sympathy in having no compulsory powers to call in, they are, on the other hand, spared the risk of incurring great unpopularity, and being placed in a very painful position. But it becomes none the less the plain duty of the Churchmen of the parish—and it is a duty which I am persuaded, when put properly before them, they will

generally acknowledge—to supply what is wanted to enable their brother parishioners who fill the office of churchwarden to perform their duty by the Church, and save their parish from shame and reproach. I have said that it cannot in reason be expected of a churchwarden that he should himself find the funds for the repair of the church and the carrying on of its services; and I may add, neither can it be expected of the clergyman. A great deal, indeed, has, as matter of fact, in the last 20 or 30 years, been done by the clergy in contributing and raising funds for repair and restoration of their churches—oftentimes, indeed I may say, very generally, including essential repair of the body of the church, such as would naturally have devolved upon the parish; and of the church furniture, which, in like manner, the parish was bound to find, how much has been supplied, as a labour of love, by the clergyman's family and friends. I speak not of this, let me say, as though I thought the lay members of the flock were insensible to the fact or regardless of it; far from it: there has been a union of hearts and hands in many a parish, of the parsonage with the squire's house and the principal families of the yeomanry—nay, of rich and poor, young and old together. But I think it is important that it should be borne in mind to how great an extent parochial church rates, even voluntary rates, have been relieved of what was, in the eye of the law, their proper burden.

Let me briefly remind you, my brethren, what are the charges to which in the view of the law, the parish is liable, and for which the parishioners, in whatever mode they prefer, are bound to find the means. Among “things appertaining to churches,” as stated in the Canons, it is ordered that “*the churchwarden or questman of every church and chapel shall, at the cost of the parish, provide the Book of Common Prayer.*” “And if any parish be yet unfurnished of the Bible of the largest volume, or,” it is added, “of the Books of Homilies allowed by authority” copies of which accordingly may still be

found in some old churches—"the said churchwardens shall within convenient time provide the same at *the like charge of the parish.*" So again in regard to "convenient and decent Tables" to be "provided and placed for the celebration of the Holy Communion," the same tables from time to time to be kept and repaired in sufficient and seemly manner, and covered, in time of Divine service, with a carpet of silk or other decent stuff, thought meet by the Ordinary of the place, if any question be made of it, and with a fair linen cloth, at the time of the ministration, as becometh that table;" and other like provisions, "all these," it is said, "to be done *at the charge of the parish.*" So again it is ordered that "the churchwardens or questmen, *at the common charge of the parishioners in every church,* shall provide a comely and decent pulpit, to be set in a convenient place within the same, by the discretion of the Ordinary of the place, if any question do arise, and to be there seemly kept for the preaching of God's Word." I might specify, in like manner, the duty laid by the rubric on the churchwardens, in conjunction with the clergyman, to provide the sacred elements for the Holy Communion "at the charges of the parish;" as also the surplice for the minister; and so again the provision to be made, not only for the repair of the church, but also for its orderly and decent keeping; free from "dust or any thing that may be either noisome or unseemly, and as best beseemeth the house of God"; in order to which, of course, there must be some one employed for the purpose, and paid for duty done. Again, there are the books to be provided to register baptisms and burials; and parchments for the duplicate copies to be kept in the Diocesan Registry; a matter in which the interests of individuals and families are often deeply concerned.

These references may suffice to remind you what the rule and order of the Church is. It does not define in what *way* the requisite funds shall be provided; it does not preemptorily require that it shall be done by this mode or that; it leaves this to the discretion of

the parties concerned: but it is a question for the parishioners, and one which ought to be brought in a distinct and business-like way before them. It is the churchwarden's duty to prepare a careful and reasonable estimate of the amount required: it is the duty of the parishioners to supply the funds. In some places, the offertory may fitly and without inconvenience lend its aid. It must at the same time be borne in mind that in the view of the Church, and by the provisions of the Prayer Book, the main objects contemplated in the offertory are the relief of poverty, of the sick members of the Church, and those that wait at the altar. "After the Divine service ended," says the Rubric, "the money given at the offertory shall be disposed of to such pious and charitable uses as the minister and churchwardens shall think fit, wherein if they disagree it shall be disposed of as the ordinary shall appoint." Notwithstanding the provisions of the Poor-law—which must have more or less the nature of a "hard and fast rule"—there is ample room left for the freewill offering, and the special blessing which attends it, of him "that provideth for the sick and needy;" to say nothing of the claims of religious objects both, within and beyond the sphere of the particular parish, as *e.g.*, the maintenance of the school, the claims of the Diocesan Societies for Education and Church Building, under the pastoral letters of the Diocesan from year to year, or the cause of our countrymen scattered abroad in the colonies of England, or of the heathen in the vast dominions subject to the British Crown. There are many parishes, doubtless, so circumstanced that these several claims can be satisfied without injury done to any. But it is important to bear in mind that the ancient system of church-rate was grounded on the principle, that the *property* of the parish was chargeable with the necessary cost of the repair of the church and churchyard, and the supply of all things requisite for Divine service; that all property has been bought and sold subject to this charge; and that the abrogation of a

power of *enforcing* payment leaves the moral and religious *duty* precisely where it was before. Churchwardens, undertaking an office involving cost of time and trouble, have a right to expect at the hands of their fellow parishioners that, when a moderate and well considered estimate has been laid before them of what is required for the decencies of public worship, for the house of their God and for the offices thereof, there shall be some guarantee against personal liability for that which the parish ought to find, and not the churchwarden. In these days of earnest zeal and love in individual hearts, ready to respond with their free will offerings, this or that gift for the service of the sanctuary will, I am persuaded, be constantly found forthcoming; but the parish should, as a body, feel itself responsible, and not throw upon the churchwarden's office an unfair and obnoxious burden.

It was customary, formerly, in the year when the Archbishop was to visit his Diocese, to defer the admission of the new churchwardens till the time of the Archbishop's Visitation. There was this inconvenience resulting, that when the Archbishop visited in the Autumn, one set of churchwardens had to continue in office a year and a half, while their successors had to serve for only half a year. It has, therefore, been arranged of late years that the churchwardens should make their presentments at the Visitation of the Archdeacon at the usual time, soon after Easter, and the newly elected churchwardens admitted then. The new churchwardens are thereby qualified to act, and have time before them to see that all things are in order by the time the Archbishop comes. I need not inform those at least who were in office at his Grace's Primary Visitation, and were cognizant of the returns required of the clergy, in the several parishes, as well as of the inquiries made at the Visitation, that it was no merely formal perfunctory proceeding; but that the papers sent in engaged the careful attention of the Diocesan in the months following the Visitation. I have no doubt there will be every

desire felt, and every effort made, to give a satisfactory report on all matters at the ensuing Visitation of the Archbishop.

Addressing a body of well-affected and right minded churchmen, such as those whom it is my privilege to meet thus from year to year at the **Primary** Visitation, or in going the circuit of the several parishes, or at local Church gatherings, especially on the auspicious occasions of laying the foundation of new Churches, consecrating the fabrics to their holy purposes, or reopening them after repair or restoration, I shall only, in conclusion, avail myself of the opportunity of expressing that we have every reason to encourage and strengthen one another, in our several ministries and offices in that branch of the Church of Christ, which is planted among us. The anticipations, which I ventured last year to express, of a less troublous and excited state of things than some persons expected, from difficulties within, have, I think, been confirmed thus far; and those who were assaulting us from without, and talking very confidently of success, have not found things turn out exactly as they hoped. Defeated in their general campaign on the wide field of the question of Disestablishment and disendowment, they resolved, apparently, this year to concentrate their forces on a point on which they could bring to bear a good deal of personal feeling and sentiment, and determined to make their special and united attack on the chosen ground of Mr. Osborne Morgan's Burials Bill. It was given out last year that there was to be a great defalcation from the Parliamentary ranks of the opponents of the Bill, and that there was nothing but defeat before us. But the mind of the laity throughout the land, fairly aroused by what they thought a principle at stake, has shewn itself pretty plainly; and it has told upon the House of Commons. I may mention that the last Parliamentary Report on Petitions gives the number of petitions presented up to April 7th, just before the Easter recess, as follows. There have been presented in favour of Mr. Osborne

Morgan's Bill, or rather Resolution, 13 petitions, with 1422 signatures; against it 1816 petitions, with 93,889 signatures.

It is, indeed, essentially a lay question, and there are tokens that our people feel it so. The clergyman, has, it is true, a life interest in the undisturbed tenure of the churchyard, his freehold, however, held not for himself, but simply vested in him in trust for the parishioners who have the right of burial there. But to them, the natives of the parish, with those that have gone before them, "the rude forefathers of the hamlet" laid there to "sleep," looking to be laid there themselves when their life's day of labour is over, and their children and children's children after them,—to them it is a matter of deep and personal concern, whether that sacred and peaceful spot, "God's acre," shall be sacred and peaceful still, or whether it shall be liable to be made the scene of discordant rites and rival creeds,—all with equal claims of abstract right to what is called "national property,"—the battle ground of faith and unbelief, or the cold dwelling place of a cheerless materialism, an endless sleep of the soul which knows no morning of the Resurrection, no "sure and certain hope" in Him who brought life and immortality to light by the Gospel. As regards the clergy, the deliberations of the Convocation of the Province of Canterbury have given proof—and the question is still before them—of a disposition to meet with tender charity the various difficulties of the case, in the spirit of Christian kindness, short of attempting that which would make the Church's ministrations unmeaning and valueless, or the occasion of a continually perplexing and painful exercise of a discretion which the Church herself, in the largeness of her charity, would, as a rule, shrink from. It is, indeed, the comprehensive character of the Church's charity, the wide stretching of her arms to all her children, which constitutes the real difficulty of the question affecting her, and the quarrel which is sought

against her. She feels, and acknowledges in her Prayer Book, the loss of ancient discipline; and the very language of her Courts of Visitation, specially of those which have regard distinctively to her lay members, bears witness to the trials which beset her. But to complain of her too hopeful and charitable language, and at the same time to endeavour, in a vague liberalism, to break down the fences of her vineyard, to sweep away the last remnants of her discipline, and lay her borders open to the invasion of every form and variety of error, is a sufficient indication how hopeless and impossible is the problem which our enemies would call upon us to solve.

The returns, meanwhile, which have been made to Parliament, in conformity with Lord Hampton's motion, and the results of which will, I think, have caused some parties something of surprise, have revealed an amount of bountiful contribution and outlay, during the last five and twenty years, upon our churches alone, which tends to show that the spirit of voluntary offering, in its best and purest sense, flourishes, after all, most under the shadow of that system under which our forefathers, in the early days of our history, the individual lords of the soil, encouraged by kings and nobles, for the glory of God, and the benefit of their people, built and endowed churches throughout the land, planted clergy everywhere, and made every man a parishioner of some parish. There has revived amongst us, happily, through God's goodness, in these latter days, an earnest desire, which is still actively and zealously at work, to make the parochial system of the Church of England really co-extensive with the enormous growth of our population, and to provide for the spiritual wants not only of our overgrown towns, but also of our outlying hamlets and scattered cottagers, among whom we find ourselves, in some cases, reviving the ruins or the memories of old chapels. It has been felt that the ancient endowments of the Church, though made to the utmost available by improved arrangements and careful management of her pre-

perty, are, as might well be supposed, incapable of supplying present needs, and require that her faithful sons should do in their own day, in the cause of God and of their brethren, what their fathers did in theirs. And there has been, moreover, an earnest endeavour—the source in some respects, perhaps unavoidably, of some difficulties which have arisen amongst us—to lay hold more effectually of a class—the young men, especially, of our middle orders—to whom the Church had seemed to have comparatively little access, and to attract them by inviting them to take part in more hearty services, in choral developments of religious worship, and charitable work. These efforts have been attended with no small measure of success. It is one of the chief duties of the churchwardens' office to promote the attendance of their fellow parishioners at the public ordinances of religion; and the influence of wise and well affected churchmen, respected for their character, and empowered by their office, may render valuable assistance to the clergyman, in securing the benefits and avoiding the dangers besetting the exercise of religious zeal and devotion. I may refer also to the cause of temperance as one which is just now enlisting in its behalf the united efforts of clergy and laity; in this diocese I may mention particularly, by diocesan and archidiaconal organization, under the sanction and with the countenance of the leading noblemen and magistrates of the county; and it is a work in which lay counsel and assistance in our several parishes, in a matter requiring careful and considerate handling, may render incalculable benefit.

I cannot more fitly conclude the words of brotherly exhortation which I have addressed to you, my lay brethren, in the belief that they would commend themselves to your kindly acceptance, than with the words in which the holy Apostle addressed his brethren of a Christian community which he had lately planted, one of the first fruits of his ministry on the continent of Europe, just opened to his apostolic zeal. "And we beseech you, brethren," said he to

the Thessalonians—and his words may suitably be addressed to the heads and representatives of the Christian laity in these days even as in those—“we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. And be at peace among yourselves. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly,” or “disorderly,” (as our margin has it), “comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient towards all men. See that none render evil for evil to any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men.” A spirit of cheerful hope and thankfulness, in constant dependance upon a higher power and a better wisdom than man’s, will best carry men through duties, it may be, often trying and difficult. “Rejoice evermore,” said the Apostle, “Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. Prove all things, hold fast that which is good. And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly, and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” To whom in His Church, through all its members, be all glory for ever. Amen.





