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THE ENGLISH LITURGY;
AND OUR DUTIES IN RESPECT OF IT.

A Sermon

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH OF KIDDERMINSTER,

ON ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S DAY, 1862.

BY

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A Sermon, &c.

2 KINGS xii. 5.

“Let them repair the breaches of the house.”

AND so let us do, my brethren, as King Jehoash, under the good instruction of Jehoiada the priest, ordered to be done unto the breaches of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. So let us do in regard of the house of the living God which is set up amongst us, the Church, which is the pillar and ground of the truth unto the people of this land. For there is in it even now, to the eye of faithful men, a breach ready to fall, the breach of schism and division. This day, in regard of circumstances which occurred two hundred years ago, is to some men a commemoration of the ejectment from their cures, and the endowments attached to them, of many of those ministers who in the time of the Great Rebellion had been put into the places of the ministers dispossessed by the Parliament; so that, in some sort, the ejectment of St. Bartholomew was a kind of retribution. There was only this difference between the two cases, that the first dispossessed were put out whether they would or no; the second, who were dispossessed on St. Bartholomew's Day, 1662, were allowed three months to consider whether they would subscribe to the Act of Uniformity. But some at once, some after deliberation, went out for conscience' sake. You must not picture to yourselves a violent forcible possession taken of 2,000

churches or parsonage-houses all on St. Bartholomew's Day; no such proceeding took place; nor, in the end, did any number like 2,000 quit their benefices. But many did; many men of singular piety and sweetness of character, ornaments of our Church and nation. And many, alas! of those who did accept the Act of Uniformity and remain, were the least desirable of all the multitude of ministers who had been intruded into those benefices in the Rebellion, being persons who were in no wise prepared for the ministry,—fanatics and zealots of all kinds,—who, as they accepted those benefices at the hand of the oppressor, had no inclination to leave them for conscience' sake. So that our poor Church was doubly wounded at that time; those whom she could least afford to spare leaving the ranks of her ministry, (by no means all of them forsaking her Communion,) and those whom she would have gladly have had to cease from ministering at her altars, remaining in her for worldly considerations.

And I would have you, dear brethren, bear in mind (whatever you hear or read to the contrary) that this is a true and impartial summary of the state of things at that time: that the ordinary representations are most grossly exaggerated; that nothing like 2,000 went out; of those 2,000 many debated long whether it were needful, and the prayers of good men were offered up for them that they might be guided aright. But it was not as if they had been the possessors of those benefices in the ordinary way of right, (for they had been put in them by violence,) and the answer of conscience had to be given in reference to the whole case. And if any man, whoever he be, should attempt to mislead an ignorant multitude by representing that 2,000 good men were, with circumstances of great cruelty, ejected from their com-

fortable houses and churches, to which they had been appointed in the ordinary and lawful course, on one day; any man who speaks this, either deliberately states what he knows is incapable of proof, or speaks on a matter of vast importance without having even tried to inform himself of the real circumstances of the case.

But St. Bartholomew's Day is another sort of commemoration also to us. It is the commemoration of the completion of the best manual of devotion which, I believe, any Church in these latter days could hope to possess with the sanction of lawful authority—the English Prayer-book. Our liturgical service, as it exists, was established about this time two hundred years ago. And in order to estimate what the real blessing of that liturgical service is, we should well consider the alternative—of extempore prayer offered by the minister, of which, after some considerable experience of it during a residence in Scotland, I can only say this, that whenever I have heard it, it is one of two things; either *a peculiar form, almost always the same*, and so not in any true sense extempore—the same things always asked for, in the same tone, with the same weakness of expression, as depending on the feelings, or state of health, or condition of the minister at the time; or if not that—if the form be in the hands of some man of power, and fervour, and imaginative propensity—then so disfigured by far-fetched expressions, by unnatural excitement, by an evident wish to astonish, in order to rouse the feelings of the congregation, that I venture to say there is not one of you who, after a few months' experience of such a service, would not wish yourselves back again, with your old Prayer-book in your hands, where everything needful for you to ask or think is contained in a well-considered form of words, well-arranged, well-digested,

according as the saints of God have in all ages held to be in accordance with Holy Scripture.

There is no request or supplication wanting in the ordinary prayers of our Prayer-book that I know of—except one, and that is, a more explicit and direct petition for missionaries; there is positively nothing in the form for Morning and Evening Prayer which we can think of to ask according to God's will, which is not there asked for—not one single thing. There is a very careful apportionment of the subjects of worship, of confession, of prayer, of praise, of humble dependence on our part; there is an entire absence of tediousness, if we give ourselves to prayer, such as no continuous prayer, poured forth extempore for the same length of time, ever fails to bring; there is such an intermixture of Scriptural language with our prayers and praises, as leaves nothing in that sort to be desired. Look into any page of the English Prayer-book, in a book which has Scripture references at the side, and judge for yourselves.

It has sometimes been said that for the poorer and less learned sort there are many phrases and words in the Prayer-book difficult to comprehend. I say first, in answer to this, that I have never heard any extempore prayer at length in my life in which there were not far greater difficulties; and secondly, I say that the most difficult passages for untaught people in our Prayer-book, such as the solemn adjuration in the Litany, where we say, "By the mystery of Thy holy Incarnation; by Thy holy Nativity and Circumcision; by Thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation," where there is only one primitive word of our forefathers, the rest being all Greek or Latin,—I say that this, and other hard passages in the Prayer-book, become by the ordinary teaching of any parish school (and it is to be hoped this

teaching will not cease) as familiar to poor men's thoughts as their own vernacular tongue.

But it is not for these reasons alone that I look upon the English Prayer-book as a special gift of God to this Church, destined manifestly to be an instrument for great good or great evil to all mankind; but I honour it most of all because it is impossible for any person to attend the service of our Church according to that prescribed form, and not have duly suggested to his heart and inmost soul, in the course of it, the great doctrines of our salvation,—every prayer being offered in the name of the Mediator, except three, where He is expressly addressed. And the glories of our redemption by Christ Jesus, the comfort and help of our sanctification by the Holy Spirit, shine forth throughout; the two Sacraments embodying these two doctrines; and no admission to her worship being recognised except through the washing with water, as at the first preaching of the Gospel; nor any real establishment in the faith except by spiritually partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Add to this, that there is no circumstance of human life which is not provided for; the instruction of the young; the solemn ratification of that sacred tie of marriage by which the continuance of the holy seed upon earth is secured; the special warning and comforting of the sick; the danger of childbirth; the burial of the happy dead; the denunciation of more obstinate sinners; the great national occasion of the accession of the sovereign, who is bound, you remember, by our laws to defend the faith; and lastly, that contingency which we, as islanders, ought ever to bear upon our hearts, a prayer for sailors while at sea. When all this is considered, I say that the day when the Act of Uni-

formity established the Prayer-book to be the manual of their ordinary devotions to English Churchmen for ever, and for ever rescued us from the risk of extempore—which is often ill-considered, ill-arranged, ill-adapted—prayer, is a day to be remembered by us throughout our generations; a day only to be regretted for the semblance of persecution with which it stands connected. I say advisedly a semblance, not really a persecution, like that of the twenty years previous, when the savage barbarity of the Puritan in England seemed permitted, as the no less savage cruelty of the Episcopalian government in Scotland, to bring both, in after ages, to reflect on the impieties they had done, and to secure to the worshipper of God in this realm for ever a merciful and gracious toleration.

But, my brethren, I have not even touched upon as yet, that, which I feel this is the opportunity which I am bound to take, of endeavouring to impress upon your hearts and consciences.

In reference to the Word of life—the Holy Scriptures—I have frequently reminded you in by-gone days, that the free circulation of it by Bible Societies, the possession of it in families, the power to read it, the interpretation of it by authorized teachers, in fact, everything which constitutes “an open Bible,” is as nothing if that Bible lies unopened on our shelves and tables, dust-defiled, dishonoured, torn by children, unread for spiritual edification.

I have now to use a similar argument with reference to our Prayer-book. It is the use of it, not the possession of it, which is the edification of the worshipper, the glory of the Church. It is very easy to stand up for Church and the Prayer-book: but what if we never care to be absent from church if we are busy, if it is

a bad day, if we are a little indisposed, if a friend comes in? What if many occasionally plead these good-for-nothing excuses for absence from the house of prayer? What if many more than a thousand *men* in this one parish never come? Then what signifies standing up for the Church? Or what if, in the use of our great manual of devotion, most men are quite as ignorant or inattentive as if it were in a foreign tongue, never utter its words, but simply listen while they are read, and that not with attention; never observe its directions; always leave the church when earnestly and lovingly invited by God's minister to join their fellow-worshippers in the holy Sacrament of the Lord's Supper; continually finding fault with this or that in the minister, making as though everything depended on one part of the service only, i.e. on the sermon; if that is not to their mind, saying at once, 'I go no more there, I like something that will rouse me;' or, 'I like such a one, not such a one.' What if this be a very true picture of the condition of an English congregation? What if, as at Kidderminster, nearly all the men of a large class, except a few old and past work, have agreed with one consent to leave religion to others—to women and children—as a thing unworthy of their freedom to think for themselves and to pursue their own will and fancy in everything? What if a Liturgy—the word means 'the Public Service' of God—is to vast numbers no Liturgy or public service at all? What if the two Sacraments of Christ's Church, ordained by Christ Himself, are either made light of, as Baptism, or utterly forsaken, as the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper? What if the office of the minister of God, which is to admonish, lead, assist, direct the people in holy things, be ignored by multitudes, and the minister be never sought by the vast number of parishioners,

except by the wealthy as a companion or partaker of their wealth, by the poor as a ready help at a pinch, not as having any rule over them; be wholly set at nought by the rich and the poor, called the 'parson' in contempt, though the word is a word of honour and respect; set down by gossips and busy-bodies as High, Low, or anything which means that they do not believe in him as a person ordained of God for their spiritual help? What if all this is the case, and grows and increases? What if I, your minister, after twenty years' labour among you, see my church three parts filled with women and aged persons—see the able and the strong deliberately rejecting my ministry? What if this parish be even a better sample than many—what if in this neighbourhood a parish twice as large as this has not one-third, one-fourth of the number of worshippers that we have? What if the securing to our parishes on this day the Liturgy of our Reformed Church, as an heritage for ever, have ended, with half the male population of England, in such a state of mind as this? What if half the men who do attend divine service in our churches really think in their inmost hearts that all these controversies about the truth, and settlement of disputed points of doctrine one way or other, are nothing worth, for that every man will be saved by the law or sect he professeth, so he be diligent to frame his life according to that law; and that the work and being of Jesus Christ, being a mystery, may be understood one way or the other without any real detriment to our hope of salvation? What if this most fatal of heresies lurks at the bottom of the hearts of any of you, and turns our preaching into nothing else than as it were the sound of the voice of one that hath a pleasant voice, or that can play well upon an instrument? Then, oh! how we

ought to use this 200th commemoration — this Bicentenary as it is called—to arise and awake, and amend our sinful lives, and try to comprehend the beauty of holiness in this blessed Book of Common Prayer!

Will you, O my own beloved flock,—many of you deeply sensible of the blessings confirmed to you this day,—help me, your minister, in endeavouring to bring about a better state of things in this parish than exists at present? Many of you, I am persuaded, could do more than you have ever yet done with friends and acquaintances, with dependants and those you come in contact with, to remind them that their Church has a truer hold upon them than they have ever acknowledged; that they have no right before God, if they value their salvation, to sit as loose to it as they do. I say this because if you will consider the whole amount of effort you have ever made to advance the cause of the Church—and that is the cause of God and of Christ—by these words in season, arguments such as you would freely employ where you were interested in any worldly matter, by using your own personal influence to bring a man to hear God's Word, and begging him not to go away from the hearing with a cold remark or a jest, but saying, 'Well now, my good friend, don't you think we ought to live according to these things which our Bible and Prayer-book enjoin?' if you will consider what your work and labour of love in this sort has been, how little, how irregular, how utterly wanting in self-denial and effort, you may by God's grace come to a better mind.

I believe the work of the ministry itself has been in these days, owing to the complications of modern society, strained to its utmost; so strained that helps and adjuncts of a doubtful kind are often suggested. I think

that as a beginning of better things, and prior to any regular organization which may follow in due course, those of the laity who are themselves penetrated with a sense of the beauty of holiness as exhibited in our Prayer-book, and of God's manifest grace bestowed on our Church for missionary and other work, might, by a new effort to uphold the work of the ministry of Christ, succeed in bringing back to their duty, as it was taught them in their childhood and early years, our godless artisans, our young men of business, whom you as well as I, can see one after another, led aside by the error of the wicked, falling from their stedfastness; our canal boatmen, absolute heathens in their way; our chance traffickers, and many others, who for want of a word in season, which a minister has no opportunity of speaking, fall a prey to the tempter, but which you could speak, if you were so minded, at various times. Ask a man whether he has ever received the Lord's Supper; shew him where it is written in the Prayer-book which he professes to revere, "Every parishioner shall communicate three times in the year." Ask him of his soul's health, even as you do of his body's health: turn his thoughts that way. Ask him if he ever uses the Prayer-book for his private devotion: ask him if he is an attached member of the Church of England: treat him as if he were not only connected with you by flesh and blood, but by a common glorious hope of everlasting salvation.

This if you will do, such an anniversary as this might be an anniversary of great spiritual growth and strength in the Church, and we might be thankful that the sifting of the subject to which the adversaries of our Church invited us has resulted in a call to every faithful member of it to furbish again his breastplate, his helmet, and his shield, to take his sword in his hand, and with prayer

to go forth upon his mission of love, if by any means from henceforth he might succeed in converting either open sinners or the careless and indifferent to a sense of God's mercy in Christ Jesus, so as to become henceforth, in the use of her formularies and attendance on her services, members of the Church.

And now I must add one other word of solemn admonition as regarding the times in which we live. The changes of the world around us, infecting the hearts of some that believe, have induced a demand for change in the ritual and ordinances of the Church. I advise you, brethren, as you value your own and your children's souls' health, not to meddle with them that are given to change. I can speak with confidence of the effect of these proposed changes here, that in no respect that I can see would any of them tend to the conversion of souls, to the healing of any differences, to the removal of any scruples (as far as I am aware). For it is not scruples of the nature intended to be removed by these changes which are the real stumbling-blocks in any man's way, but the subtle pride of his own heart. The differences which exist among Christians have a deeper root than these changes would touch, our adversaries themselves being our witnesses. The conversion of souls dead in trespasses and sins, the softening of hard hearts, the destruction of inveterate prejudices, is to be sought in other ways than by legislative enactment concerning doctrine and worship. Oh! my brethren, try to make this holy form of doctrine, delivered to the saints of old, handed down by them to us, effectual to your salvation, by praying heartily in those forms of prayer to which you say Amen; by responding to those exhortations which you hear, not after the manner of men, saying, 'Twas a good sermon or a bad, a fine sermon or

a poor one,' but by doing faithfully what you were exhorted to do; by embracing with all your soul the great doctrine of the justification of sinners by faith in Christ, and their sanctification by the Spirit, which the formularies of your Church set forth as the way of life. Thus, and not by any of the changes which have been proposed, will the hope of better things dawn upon us; and after a time, it may be, the breaches which strife and division have made in the Lord's house shall be repaired, and the purity of its ordinances, the order of its services, the faithful attendance of its members, will be restored as at the first. For even here, though you may say these walls were built when corruption of doctrine had overspread the land, yet even here was a day when the builders brought forth the topstone with shouting, crying "Grace! grace!" unto it; and the dwellers hereabouts, I doubt not, entered into these gates with thanksgiving and into these courts with praise, hoping and praying—and even yet their prayers may be answered—that here, in this place, God would meet His waiting people, and bless and keep them evermore.



