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GOD'S JUDGMENTS
TEACHING RIGHTEOUSNESS.

A SERMON

DELIVERED

THE NATIONAL FAST DAY,

JANUARY 4, 1861,

IN ST. MATTHEW'S PARISH,
PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY MD

BY THE

REV. JOHN H. CHEW, A. M.
Rector.



WASHINGTON:
R. A. WATERS, PRINTER, NEAR KIRKWOOD HOUSE
1861.

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ISAIAH xxvi. 9.—“When thy Judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.”

These words are of especial interest to us to-day. God's Judgment is now upon our land. One of the most grievous of the divine judgments is overshadowing our people. You have heard the earnest proclamation of our Chief Magistrate, calling upon us to humble ourselves before the Lord. You have heard the fatherly exhortation of our Bishop, enforcing the requisition of the civil authority.

At the instance of both of these authorities, we have united in the most earnest entreaties to our heavenly Father, that he will have mercy upon us—that he will spare us—that he will turn us from our sins—and, in his own good time, turn from us those evils that we have most justly deserved.

And what is the judgment that has overshadowed our land and clothed our people with mourning, or, at least, filled their hearts with anxiety and the most dreadful apprehensions? What is it? It is not the pestilence. Never has the whole country been blessed with more healthful seasons. It is not famine. The greater portion of our land has brought forth its increase with unusual abundance: our garners are full and overflowing. It is not the invasion of a foreign enemy. We are at peace with all the world. The most powerful nations take pleasure in doing us honor. Princes come in person to acknowledge the excellence of our institutions. Our flag is respected—almost revered—on every sea. A proper appreciation of the Father of our

Country has come to be considered a most excellent criterion of civilization. Where Washington is most highly honored, there is most liberty and most public virtue. Where he is not known, or, being known, is not honored, there "darkness covereth the land, and gross darkness, the people."

We are not suffering, then, from any of the public calamities that usually give rise to the duty in which we are now engaged—the observance of a National Fast;—but we are laboring under a visitation more grievous, if possible, than any of these; a state of things which, if not overruled and remedied by the good providence of God, may bring upon us evils infinitely worse than all of these together, and make us wish that God had humbled us by a famine, or cut us off by a pestilence, or cemented our union by a foreign invasion, and not allowed us to enter into civil strife, and turn our swords against those they were meant to defend; evils that may well put into the minds of many of our best citizens the noble sentiment that has lately been so happily expressed by one of our gallant officers,* "I wish not to fight against my countrymen. If they compel me to do so, may the first shot they fire pierce my heart!" In such a warfare (from which may God preserve us!) the lot most to be envied would indeed be that thus indicated—the lot of those who are the first to fall.

Different views which are held with regard to public measures, are held with so much tenacity and urged with so much violence, that it seems impossible for us to continue much longer a united people; and at the same time, so strong are the bonds by which the fathers of our republic, under divine guidance, compacted the union of our States, that it seems equally impossible for that Union to be dissolved without the most dreadful evils—the most direful calamities befalling our citizens.

* Major Anderson, at Fort Sumter.

Already, even by the prospect of such an occurrence, public credit is shaken, commerce is impeded, all the departments of trade are suffering, and honest laborers are deprived of employment and deprived of bread. And if such be the effects of the prospect, what may we not expect from the reality? If the distant cloud can overshadow us with such gloom, what may we not apprehend if it should be allowed to come nearer and dart upon us those thunderbolts which, even in the distance, are so much dreaded!

But our object to-day is not so much to distress ourselves with anxious apprehensions of the future, as to humble ourselves in remembrance of the past, and draw near to God in a sincere repentance for all our sins, that have deserved, and perhaps occasioned, our present troubles. In obedience to authority, both civil and ecclesiastical, we keep this day as a day of national fasting—a day of humiliation before God. It is proclaimed by authority “to be kept holy as a solemn fast.”

When Jonah prophesied against Nineveh and announced its approaching destruction, the king proclaimed a fast, and urged his people to “cry mightily unto God and to turn, every one from his evil way and from the violence that was in their hands.” With such manifest warnings as are now given to us, it would have been worse than heathen impiety in our rulers not to have made the requisition that we are now obeying. And now that the requisition is made of us, and the day has been set apart for this holy duty, we shall be greatly guilty if we observe it not in its spirit as well as in its letter: the men of Nineveh will rise up with us in the judgment and condemn us; for they really humbled themselves before God, and God had mercy upon them and spared their city.

And before we proceed any further, let us remark, how proper a fast it was, that the king of Nineveh proclaimed and the

people observed. It was not simply an afflicting of themselves in outward things; it was not merely an abstaining from their ordinary enjoyments; it was all of this; but at the same time it was much more besides; they were exhorted to turn from the evil of their ways, and to forsake their sins. This is the fast that God respects; a fast that enables us more fully to realize the evil of sin, and gives us strength to forsake it. Oh, my brethren, that we might keep such a fast this day! Oh, that all our people throughout the vast extent of this great republic, might keep such a real, genuine and spiritual fast in the sight of God! If this could be the case—if this day could be the commencement of the general prevalence of true religion amongst our people—then indeed, our present troubles would result in the richest blessings, the greatest prosperity, our nation has ever enjoyed. Our vexed questions, looked at dispassionately and calmly discussed, would soon be happily adjusted; our rulers and counsellors and all our public officers, living in the fear of God, would be worthy of the confidence of men; all our citizens, being only anxious to perform their respective duties, and no longer restless, impatient, and grasping after offices, would experience “how good and pleasant it is for bretheren to dwell together in unity.” The State would be well served everywhere by honest men; and the consequence would be, that peace and tranquility and happiness would be established again throughout our land. If all our people would be taught of the Lord;—if all, without exception, would learn that righteousness which God’s judgments are designed to teach; then should we be indeed a favored nation; our land would realize those prophetic descriptions of the Messiah’s Kingdom, which, as far as they refer to the Church militant, are highly poetical, and are literally true only of the Church triumphant. Heaven would be begun on earth. But if this may not be, as surely it may not, let us trust, and let us

earnestly pray, that we may come as near it as possible. May such a general impression be made by the present serious aspect of affairs, and by the observance of this day, that a sense of our dependence upon God, and of our duty both to Him and to each other, may widely prevail and produce its proper effects upon us all!

One object which we have in the observance of this day, is to make a public acknowledgment of our dependence upon God. Feeling and realising, in this time of distress, our entire dependence upon Almighty God, we come to Him for mercy; we cry to Him for help in this our time of need; we draw near to Him, confessing our sins, and acknowledging that whatever he shall lay upon us, we justly deserve it all.

In a popular government, such as ours, there is apt to be a great deal of evil in connexion with the obtaining and administering of offices of trust; and I fear that there has been, and that there is now, among us a great amount of this kind of evil. Such great improvements have been made, of late, in arts and sciences and all things pertaining to this world, that too many of us have been so much occupied with the things of this world—the things that are seen—as to be too unmindful of God, from whom all these improvements came, and of all the things that are unseen—the great and dreadful realities of the future world. When I consider the unexampled increase of our population, and its utter disproportion to the means of religious worship and religious improvement, I am amazed at the contemplation of the vast number of our citizens who must be practically unbelievers—who must be living in open neglect of their duty to God. When we add to these considerations the enormous growth of some of our cities; and when we remember how sin, crime, and all manner of profligacy and ungodliness, have always abounded where large numbers are collected together; we have too much reason to fear that the sins of our people are sufficient to call

down upon us the most severe, the most dreadful visitations of divine justice.

We come together to-day then to acknowledge these sins, and to humble ourselves under the sense of them. And not only do we mourn to-day for the sins of our people in general; but each and every one for his own sins in particular. Each one of us is an individual member of the great body politick, the nation; and as the sins of the nation are made up of the sins of all the individuals of whom it is composed, so the most acceptable way for the nation to humble itself and confess its sins, is for each separate person to examine into his own conscience, to probe his own heart, to search its secret recesses, to confess his own sins with shame and confusion of face, to pray for the grace of repentance, and to resolve, by the assistance of that grace, to live henceforth a sober, a righteous, and a godly life.

If the present judgment—the confusion of our counsels—our being given up to our own devices—is owing to the sins of our nation, it is owing in part, of course, to the sins of each one of us. But more than this may be said. We read in scripture of great national calamities being occasioned wholly, by the transgressions of a single individual. We read of fearful consequences to a people, from the sin of only one of their number—from the sin of an Achan, a private citizen as well as from the sin of a David or a Saul.

This point has been forcibly urged by another. “One soldier, taken by himself,” says Dr. South, “is of no considerable force; but as joined to the body of an army, he will conquer and trample down towns and cities. One single drop of water, how contemptible is it! but as it is joined to the ocean, so is it terrible; it drowns, it destroys. Wherefore let no one flatter himself and think that his sin has no share in the misery of the nation; for every particular man may think so as well as one; and if it should be true of

every one, to whose sin should we ascribe the calamities we endure? For the sin of its inhabitants, a land is said to mourn; a fruitful land to be made barren for the wickedness of them that dwell therein. And who knows but mine and thy sins have provoked God to visit the nation with this judgment? How dost thou know but thy profaneness, thy drunkenness, may cause the land to mourn! thy slighting God's ordinances, and thy causeless absenting thyself from His worship, may cause God to appear against the nation in anger!"

If these things be so, how earnestly, how heartily, how sincerely, should each one of us repent and turn to God! Each one of us knows, as none else knows but God, the plague of his own heart, the secret sin, the love of sin, which he has been allowing. Oh, let us lay it all open to God this day. Let us pray God to open our eyes, that we may see and know our sinfulness; that we may see sin in all its hatefulness; that we may loathe and abhor it; that we may abandon and forsake it; that we may so truly repent and turn unto Him, that we may enjoy His favor, and be prepared either to bear patiently whatever He shall lay upon us, and do our duty under whatever trials may await us, or else to make a proper manifestation of our thankfulness, if in His infinite mercy He shall remove from us the cup of bitterness and bless us with public prosperity.

Turning thus to the Lord with all our hearts, we cannot but derive advantage even from His present grievous chastisement. All His visitations and corrections are intended for the good of His people; and doubtless they will promote our good, if only we submit patiently to His infinite wisdom. The hyssop may be bitter; but doubtless it is intended to purify and cleanse us. All that we have to do is to put our trust in God, to repent of our sins, and to walk in the fear and love of God, doing our duty in whatever station He has

placed us; we may well trust all else to His infinite wisdom and merey; all will be well with us—most probably even in this world, and certainly in the better world to come.

And as we pray that the anxieties of the present season may be blessed to our good and the good of our people; and as we read in our text that “when God’s judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness,” let us now, in conclusion, briefly consider what more we may learn, what further instruction we may derive, from the dispensation of Providence, under which we are now mourning.

In our own weakness, helplessness, and utter inability to avert impending evils, we learn to look up and behold the majesty of God. A nation clothed in mourning—a vast assembly bathed in tears—a royal bier containing a lifeless form which once was royalty, suggested, on a well known occasion, a sentiment with which we may well be impressed in surveying the present condition of our country; and that is, that we are as nothing—we are less than the dust of the balance—“*God only is great! God only is great!!*”

As we are reminded by the Prophet, “Behold the nations are as a drop of the bucket and are counted as the small dust of the balance; behold He taketh up the Isles as a very little thing. All nations before Him are as nothing; and they are counted to Him less than nothing, and vanity.”

But though God is so great and so highly exalted; yet we are assured that He condescends to behold the things that are done upon earth. Our Lord has taught us that not even a sparrow falleth to the ground without the knowledge of our heavenly Father. And if that be the case, how can we believe that He is indifferent to the fall, or the rise of a kingdom or a republic? I believe that our republic was raised up by His providence. I trust it was intended to promote some great and good ends which he designs to accomplish.

And I know that if it now fails, it will be on account of the wickedness of our people, and our unworthiness of the trust committed to us.

From the danger now so imminent to our most admirable government, and from the causes that threaten its destruction, we may learn to realize more fully than ever, the true origin of all good governments, and to feel that "the Powers that be," whether hereditary monarchs or rulers chosen by the people, "are of God," and are to be respected as representing His authority. We are too apt to associate the divine authority of government with the exploded notion of 'the divine right of kings.' But now, by the occurrences of the present day, we may well be reminded, as I doubt not most of you have been since the commencement of this crisis—we may well be reminded of these important truths; that God so constituted man that he stands in need of civil government; that God gave man faculties, by the proper use of which he is capable of supplying that necessity, of which he is thus conscious; and that when, in the exercise of these faculties, men have compacted a form of government, the legal administrators of that government are to be respected as bearing the authority of God.

Taking this view of the origin of government, it follows of course that whenever, by reason of human imperfection, there shall be any inequality or injustice in the workings of its constitutional provisions, then wisdom suggests, and justice requires, that the rights of all should be respected, and that arrangements should be made, but made with discretion, to secure those rights.

The point which, in this connexion, I would urge, is this: that it was God who gave to our forefathers the wisdom and the virtue, to construct this government—this most excellent government, which has so long been the wonder and the admiration of the world; that though it may occasionally need

repairs, those repairs should be made calmly, dispassionately, with circumspection and with caution; and that it is entirely too sacred a fabric to be lightly and needlessly destroyed. Certain it is that if it is once destroyed, its place will never again be supplied.

And finally, let us learn from our present troubles how important it is to be moderate and calm, full of charity and brotherly love. If those that have the disposal of the questions that now divide us could only approach them in this spirit, a satisfactory settlement might soon be accomplished. Let us all, my brethren, endeavor to think soberly and talk calmly and discreetly on all the subjects that are now agitated. I mean not that we should be timid, and, for fear of consequences, advise or desire that any State, or any section of our country, should submit to oppression or injustice. It is not thus that our worthy ancestors taught us to act. But we should desire, and, as far as our influence goes, we should endeavor, that the rights of all may be secured by the use of moderate and peaceful measures. Such measures are by far the most likely to secure those rights. If we are all discreet, and endeavor to act in the fear of God, God will order all things as in his infinite wisdom he sees to be best for us.

Oh, let us remember that we are brethren, speaking the same language, and bound together by all the ties of country, kindred and religion. Let us pray God to inspire us with sentiments of brotherly love, to enable us to exercise forbearance in this our time of trial, to make allowance for each other's infirmities, and to bear each other's burdens. Let us call to mind the hardships, the perils, the sufferings, in the patient endurance of which our forefathers procured for us this goodly heritage; and let us endeavor by all virtuous and honorable means, to retain it as the inheritance of all their sons.

Let us remember the days of old, when the North and the

South were so firmly united in the bonds of a common patriotism—a common love of country, and a fellowship in suffering for that country's good. Let not sympathy for either section of our country obliterate charity for the other; but let us remember that throughout its whole extent, and in every part of it, we are all united by ties that should be regarded with a holy reverence.

May God, who alone can order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men, so order all things by his providence, that brotherly love may be restored to us again, and we may live together in quietness and confidence!

May God so bless to us his present judgments, that we may derive from them the lessons of righteousness they are designed to convey, and walking before him in all holy obedience, enter into that godly quietness, that brotherly confidence, in which alone there is lasting strength—*Amen.*









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