

GOD WITH THE AGED:

A

SERMON

PREACHED TO THE FIRST CHURCH,

JAN. 7, 1849.

THE SUNDAY AFTER THE DEATH

OF

HON. PETER C. BROOKS.

BY N. L. FROTHINGHAM,

PASTOR OF THE CHURCH.

Debate.

BOSTON:

PRINTED BY JOHN WILSON, 21, SCHOOL STREET.

1849.

G O D W I T H T H E A G E D :

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S E R M O N

P R E A C H E D T O T H E F I R S T C H U R C H ,

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T H E S U N D A Y A F T E R T H E D E A T H

O F

H O N . P E T E R C . B R O O K S .

BY N. L. FROTHINGHAM,

PASTOR OF THE CHURCH.

Private.

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itself

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S E R M O N .

ISAIAH, xlvi. 4. — AND EVEN TO YOUR OLD AGE I AM THE SAME; AND EVEN TO
HOAR HAIRS WILL I CARRY YOU. I HAVE MADE, AND I WILL DELIVER YOU.

BLESSED be God for all those who have found this to be true; who have been carried thus to the end, and were then laid down in peace! Blessed be God for all those who were conducted graciously, and who conducted themselves honorably, through a long career of this life's service, and were then delivered with equal mercy out of all its troubles! Blessed be God for all those whose "hoar hairs" were crowns of glory, because always found in the ways of righteousness, and who have now exchanged these for crowns of incorruption, because they have been redeemed into an everlasting inheritance! For their influence while they continued to live, for their comforts when they came to die, we give thanks. They have fought a good fight, and are now safely at rest. They have kept the faith, and now the faith keeps them. Nothing is more venerable than their example; nothing more fragrant than their memory.

My hearers will not be surprised that I bring before them, on the new year, the subject of old age and death. It is not that the flight of time is always connected with the changes it will bring to pass, and with thoughts of decay and mortality. It is not that the beginning so naturally suggests the end, though this would be reason enough for endeavoring to guide your thoughts in that direction. But there is another cause that is urgent with me, and will indeed allow me no choice. My heart compels me to one theme; and I yield the rather to this necessity of affection, because I know that your feelings are in unison with mine. Your expectation from this day's service is turned the same way that my own purpose is. You are concerned, as a religious society, in the events to which I shall allude, and in the bereavement that is associated with so many recollections of departed years.

The twelvemonth that has just rolled away from us has carried with it an unusual number of our aged friends. The worth of some of them may have been known but a little way beyond their own households. They will be missed but by the few who enjoyed the evening light of their quiet smiles, or watched over their infirmities. Others filled more conspicuous stations, and left a wide void when they were removed out of sight. I will say nothing of those who had no special connection with us, — of those who inspired no other interest

than that which always attends advanced periods of life, and their well-worn honors. I speak only of such as had made their presence familiar to this house of worship. The year had scarcely opened, when the most aged member of our congregation* gave way at last under the pressure of time; having awaited long, with a willing looking-out for it, that release. It was still winter when an humble eulogy was pronounced here on an illustrious name,† that was inscribed in our church-book as well as in the history of his country's glory, and that was struck from the roll of the living with as much distinction as it had continued through so long a period to stand there. The autumn was declining into winter again, when another friend,‡ whose season had waned even further than the year, was remembered among us with the sympathies of an ancient regard, since there was nothing but his memory left. The last Lord's day called us to refer to one of our number, who was just touching the further limit of his fourscore years.§ He was approaching it with a steady strength, surrounded with the domestic affections to which he was fully alive, and with the active cares in which he could still accomplish his part, and with the satisfactions of an upright and well-approved course. But he was suddenly forbidden quite to lay his hand upon that far goal, where

* Samuel Austin.

† John Quincy Adams.

‡ Edward Reynolds.

§ John Woodberry.

the psalmist admonishes of labor and sorrow that cannot lie off much further. And now it has pleased God to strike far deeper into this church, and to clothe many of us with the garments of mourning. He has removed from our fellowship, and from numerous earthly trusts, and from a wide circle of revering love, one whom all knew, and whom the past generation as well as the present had learned to respect. It was among the exercises of my boyish hand to write his name again and again, long before I ever thought to see his face, at the head of the list of our senators; a station where he rendered important services, which are still felt through this whole commonwealth. It was among the most precious advantages of my manhood to be guided by the clear wisdom of his counsel, and to have before me continually the humble loftiness of his character. The last of my tears have dropped at the thought, that I should not again look upon his benign countenance, or hear the voice that had never spoken during these so many years but in the tones of advice or playfulness or affection.

It is a delicate task for me, and a trying one, to undertake to make mention of him here thus openly. But I can leave it to no one else. It belongs to me. For half a century and upwards, he occupied the same relative position in the old meeting-house and the new; and how constantly, with the constancy that marked him in every

thing, he was here in his place! He had become the oldest survivor in an assembly, from which death is every year transplanting the flowers, and harvesting the shocks of corn that are fully ripe. And therefore the minister here has permission and a call to speak of him. He was a public man and a benefactor; one to whom many looked up, and many who never saw him were largely indebted. He was unostentatiously distinguished among his fellow-citizens. He was a giver and a worker, wherever he felt that the welfare or the charities of the community were concerned. And therefore I ought to speak of him, and must speak. Make allowance for me in performing this duty, if I do it with the utmost simplicity and with some reserves. For these are best suited to the modest excellence that always sought to deserve praises rather than hear them; and these alone can keep within control the personal feelings that have to enter into the task of describing it. If I should say all that is in my heart, it might seem to exceed propriety, or would be choked in the utterance.

Look back, those of you who can, upon the most active part of the life of the venerable friend we have just lost; though his life was so full of a true principle and energy, that it refused to be ever otherwise than active, and active towards a purpose. You who cannot remember so long as that, may have it from tradition how diligent he was, early and late; how devoted to every

thing that carried the form of an obligation ; how faithful in whatever was confided to him ; how quick, but how accurate ; how observant, with the powers of a keen and comprehensive judgment, of whatever it became him to take into his regard ; how strict in his rules, but how kind in his manners ; how serious in his views, yet how cheerful in his dispositions. He wasted no time. He forgot no responsibility. It did not cost him an effort to resist the temptations of his younger days ; and especially that of an almost universal custom, which swept into dangerous indulgences some of the most influential and best-reputed men. He was guardedly temperate before it became discreditable to be otherwise. He was temperate in all things. By his caution and promptness and courtesy and industry and unblemished probity, he exalted his plain employment into so much consideration, that it attracted persons from a distance to avail themselves of its advantages. These qualities would have given him the lead in any department of life, on which he might have chosen to exercise his sagacious mind and the composed resolution of his will. For they were moral qualities. They were such as carry with them their own nobility and prevalence. They are almost sure to beat out the paths even of temporal success. They remind me of what a Roman biographer says — and he says it twice — of an admirable man, the stamp of whose worth resembled, in more respects than

I can stop to name, those features of character which are now claiming our notice, and to which my heart turns with a homage and an affection that strive to outdo each other. The language of this writer is, — “He so conducted himself, that the proverb might seem fulfilled in him, ‘Each one’s behavior moulds his fortune;’ for he did not fashion his condition, till he had first modelled himself; taking care that no one should rightfully censure him in any thing.”* The person thus spoken of — after a lengthened course of retired industry, pursuing a strict method of life, exhibiting a frugal liberality, enjoying impartially the friendship and confidence even of those who were not friends together, and employing his opulent means for use and propriety and never for display — was buried without the usual pomp, at the fifth milestone from the city where his name was a praise. In all these respects, the noble man whom we mourn has been like him. He was a pattern of mercantile integrity, without belonging exactly to the class of our merchant-citizens. As such, he spread at the time a healthful influence extensively around him. As such, he may worthily and usefully be held up to the imitation of the present age, which he has left so far behind him.

“Truth sat not on her square more firm than he.”

Come on with me now for a space, and see him, as

* *Nepotis Atticus*, cap. xi.

very many of you may have seen him, in the early and mellow afternoon of his tranquil but busy day. He is the same man in his retirement that he was when more before the world, — the same, but that the hair has fallen away from his ample forehead, and what has been left is changing its color. What should suffer change in the spirit that was so fixed in its sentiments, its habits, its reliances? There was no indolence, no selfishness, no timid retreat, no giving way either in the energy or the exercise of any faculty that he ever possessed. The methods of the former discipline guided him still. He kept himself employed, without hurry and without fatigue. He divided himself between four different cares; all salutary and honorable, and all nearly in the same proportion. There was the cultivation of his farm, the improvement of his ancestral acres; that noble and almost divine labor, which one shares with the vast processes of nature and the all-surrounding agency of God. This took up much of his attention, in that temper of silent reverence with which every cultivated mind observes the works of the Creator. Then there were his books, which he read rather for instruction than for a pastime; read with an extraordinary wakefulness of thought, and a sincere love of the task; and read so much, as to lead me often to think that the understandings of some professed students were less nourished than his was from that source of information. There were his friends also.

and they were a large circle ; the social intercourse that no one enjoyed with a higher satisfaction than he. He always contributed to it as much as he received. His company was welcome to young and old. No one left it without a pleasant impression of that uniform urbanity, which was no trick of manner, but the impulse of a kindly heart. No one left it without wishing him a real and earnest blessing with the formal farewell. Finally, there was devolved upon him the management of a large estate, that might have been made much larger if he had chosen to have it so ; if his feeling had been less scrupulous, or his hand less beneficent ; or if his soul had been greedy of gain. The estate, if it had been a thousand times greater, would have been less than himself.

In this practical philosophy of life he perseveringly dwelt. How much better than what theorists and talkers call philosophy, was this unpretending, unuttered wisdom ! No one could have been frequently with him, without being struck with his forbearance, prudence, and self-command ; with his charitable judgment of other persons, and his considerate treatment of all ; with the gentleness of his demeanor and the modesty of his speech ; with the simple, quiet force that was seen to lie in him ; — seen by the reflecting eye, not heard through the loud expression of itself, or any expression. He carefully avoided speaking with asperity even of those who de-

served it, and was merciful towards the errors into which he never fell. His sense of character was at the same time extremely delicate. Delicacy was one of the features of his solid mind. He seemed to have an instinctive perception of what is becoming, as well as an inherent respect for what is just; and he was therefore never without dignity. He valued a good name as second to nothing but goodness itself; and therefore he avoided every appearance of evil. How free he was from every shadow of assumption, you all perceived. His tastes remained simple in every thing, — his desires few. His affections were the only thing in him that knew no bounds. It was a part of his wisdom to be moderate in his expectations, as well as in his enjoyments; and not to demand too much from frail creatures, and an inconstant world, and a hasty life.

Another stage of that life has now been passed; and let me show him to you once more. He is stricken in years. Stricken. Not sorely and painfully, — not disparagingly and shamefully. But nature, and not he, shows signs of drooping. His eye is dim. His steps are straitened. His active power is departing from him. It is not by violence. It is not by disease. He is only marked, that he may be called for. If he was slow to acknowledge this, he had prepared himself for it, and met it with a smiling constancy. His brave and cheerful spirit did not forsake him. His self-poise did not tremble.

He remained consistent in every thing as before. His love for those nearest to him took even warmer expression. He presented a beautiful image of what the decline and last term of a virtuous life can be. There was not a moment of regret, or repining, or uneasiness, or discontent; not a touch of the moroseness that is said, though I do not believe it, to darken usually along the track of age. With an unruffled, unclouded serenity, but with a lively attention, he took an interest in the course of affairs that was going on at a distance from him or around him, and that was soon for him to be nothing.

He was now constrained to give up his attendance on those public offices of religion, which he held in the most sacred honor, on which he had always waited with the most assiduous devotion, and in which he had taken the sincerest delight. But the faith of that religion glowed mildly in his breast. The temper of that religion was abundantly manifested in the meek fruits that it bore; in the fervid gratitude with which he surveyed the past, and acknowledged his surrounding mercies; and in the manly submission with which he continued to go on whither it might please God. The assurance of the text was never made a more blessed reality to any human being than it was to him: "Even to your old age I am the same, and I will carry you; I have made, and I will deliver you." Yes, that heavenly presence went with him, and gave him peace.

When he became more closely shut in, and more heavily encumbered with the weights that cannot but press upon the failing frame, all that you saw of him was just what it had ever been. He did not speak or do any thing unworthy of himself, or unlike himself. Age moves on by successive platforms, rather than over an inclined plane. Every new descent to a lower stair, in the way that was now near its end, he made with perfect acquiescence, and even with an endearing gracefulness. He looked round him from it, and spoke rather cheerfully than sadly. Not a sigh escaped him, — much less a complaint; not a moan of pain, not a gesture of impatience. He was composed. He was content. He was thankful.

It seemed good to the Almighty and most merciful Father, when this servant of his, whose way through the world had been so long, so blameless, so useful, was brought down to the bed from which he had strength no more to rise, that he should not be fastened to a sick couch; that he should not linger, after there was nothing further for him to do; that he should not be detained from his better portion. The same loving-kindness that had been shed round his former hours was ready to crown the last. He had scarcely finished replying to an anxious inquiry, how he found himself, with his usual word, "I am well," when he was indeed well; delivered from the infirmities of the flesh, and the troubles of time,

and all the various exposures of a mortal lot. He only appeared to grow more weary, and then to drop asleep. His hand became cold, while his feet yet preserved the warmth of life. The angel of death had taken him by it as with a friendly clasp to lead him hence, and his steps took hold of the life eternal.

It is a great public as well as private loss, when so eminent and estimable a person is removed from the earth. It will be felt in many quarters, where his advice was waited for with deference, and where his aid has been habitually received. A fountain of supply has been stopped. An object of confidence is missed from his place. But the example of the excellent is never lost. The lessons of their uprightness and purity speak on. The hopes to which they confided their souls live on. The good that they have done remains after them, as well as follows them. "The righteous shall be in everlasting remembrance."

" All heads must come
To the cold tomb.
Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet and blossom in the dust."

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