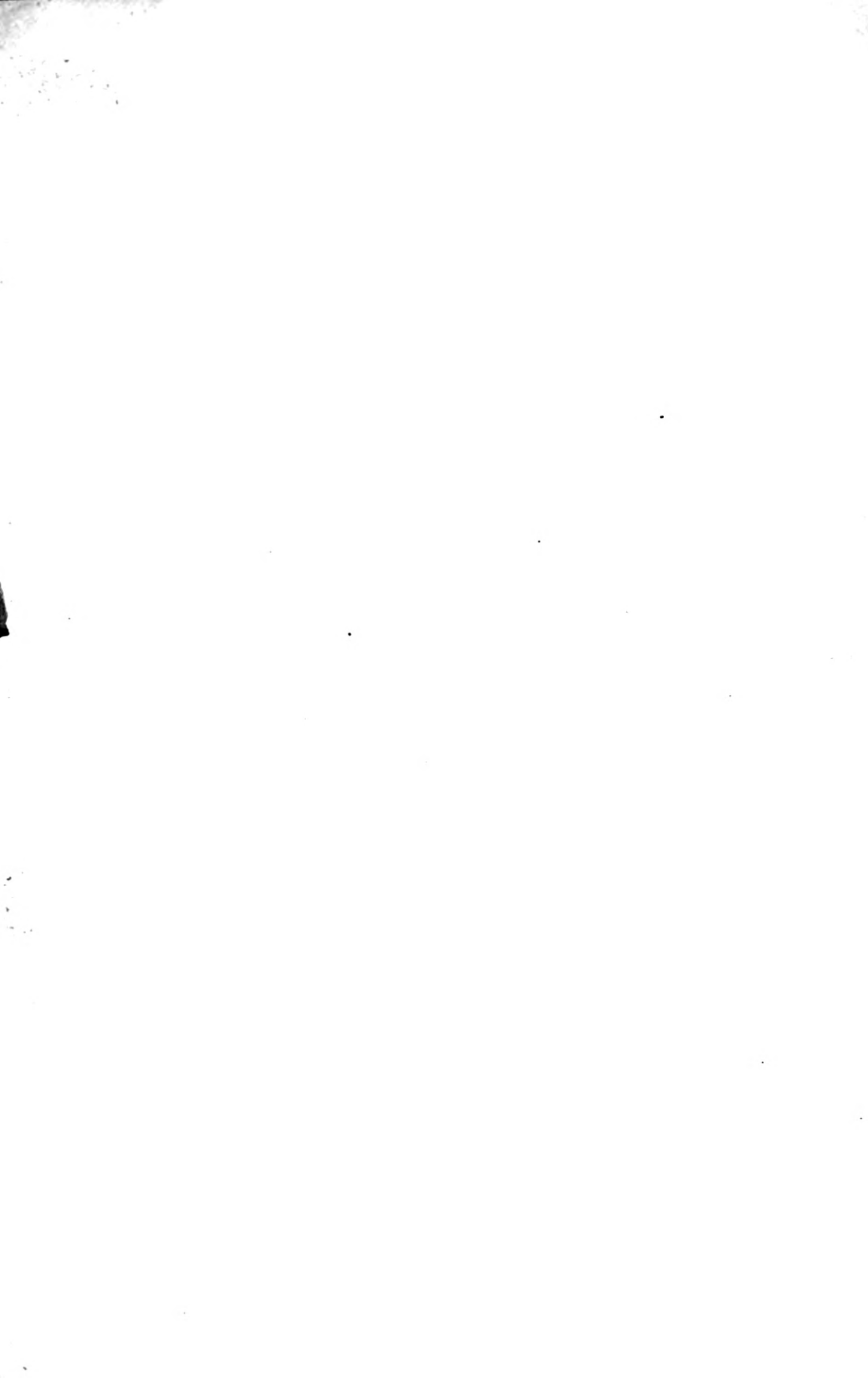




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THE HOLY SEED:

A

SERMON,

*G.T.
Dec 1864*

PREACHED AT THE

OPENING OF THE CHAPEL OF CHRIST'S COLLEGE,
BRECON,

ON THE 24TH JUNE, 1864.

BY

CONNOP THIRLWALL, D.D.

BISHOP OF ST. DAVID'S.

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A
SERMON,
&c.

ISAIAH vi. 13.

“As a teil tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast their leaves: so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof.”

THE processes of vegetable growth and decay have ever suggested comparisons with the nature and destinies of man. Such comparisons abound both in secular and sacred literature. The most ancient of the heathen poets likens the successive generations of mankind to the leaves which year after year strew the ground of the forest. Another in a later age takes the like occasion to lament the peculiar hardship of man's lot. The lowliest herbs, after they have faded and withered away, revive and renew their bloom with the returning spring; but men, the great, the strong, the wise, once sunk into the silent bosom of the earth, rest there in a long, interminable, unawaking sleep. I need hardly remind you how frequently the like illustration of the same fact, the shortness of human life,

occurs in the poetical parts of Holy Writ. "Man cometh forth as a flower, and is cut down." "All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; surely the people is grass." "We all do fade as a leaf." But the fact of universal every-day experience is all that these passages have in common with one another. In the application and the practical conclusion there is the widest possible difference between the sacred and the profane writers. In Scripture the frail tenure of mortal existence is chiefly dwelt upon for the sake of bringing out the more vividly by the force of contrast the idea of the eternal unchangeable Being of Beings. "I," says the Psalmist, "am withered like grass; but Thou, O Lord, shalt endure for evermore;" "As for man, his days are as grass; as a flower of the field so he flourisheth, for the wind passeth over it and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more; but the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children." "Surely," says Isaiah, "the people is grass: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand for ever." No such thought relieved the sadness of the heathen view of human life; and as little did the observation suggest to the heathen mind such a prayer as the Psalmist's, "So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." Very different were the lessons which the heathen writers were used to draw from

the same truth. To them the warning suggested by the shifting seasons of the year, and the changes they bring in the aspect of nature, was: not to indulge a hope savouring of immortality, or reaching far beyond the passing day; not to hoard that which must soon slip from the owner's grasp, not to pry into the future, but to seize the joy of the present hour. With them, the "conclusion of the whole matter" was not, "fear God, and keep his commandments," but, "let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die."

These maxims, it must be observed, represent not the opinions of a few, but the habitual state of mind which prevailed among the most intelligent and cultivated nations of antiquity. They express the common popular view of the subject. And when we consider the natural tendency of such a view, how, in the mass of the people, it must have fostered a stupid, grovelling, brutish sensuality; that, in more thoughtful and generous spirits, the unavailing endeavour to stifle the instincts of our rational nature, and drown the care of the future in present enjoyment, must have constantly embittered their cup of sensual delight, and have urged them to seek refuge from the thought by which they were continually haunted, in the wildest excesses of tumultuous passions, what reason have we to be thankful for the heritage of a purer faith and better hope, which has come down to us from Him who brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel! Too often, indeed, we may measure

the value of the gift, not only by comparison with the state of those who lived before it had been brought into the world, but of numbers in our own day and our own land, who, whether through their own fault, or the lack of charity in others, have been deprived of their share in that glorious inheritance, are aliens from the faith of Christ, "having no hope and without God in the world." When we would describe their condition in a single word, we say that they are in a state of heathenism. With us indeed through God's mercy this is the state, not of the many, but of comparatively the few; and the greatest, the most pressing of all works of Christian charity in our generation is to keep down this number, to win those who already belong to it from their darkness and lethargy to the light and life of Christ, and, by Christian teaching and training, to save those who would otherwise be in danger of being drawn down into the like hopelessness and debasement, and of finally forfeiting their spiritual birthright.

When we reflect on the natural and proper operation of such a principle as that which, as we have seen, was predominant among the noblest races of the ancient world, we may find it difficult to conceive how society could have been kept together, in any tolerable degree of order and prosperity, under its influence. But experience shews that men are not governed exclusively, or even mainly, by their principles or opinions, but that these are often counteracted and neutralized by their affections, instincts, and habits. Unless

some such controlling agencies had been at work in Greece and Rome their history could not have been so memorable as it is; they could not have attained such renown in arts or arms; they could not have left monuments of genius and wisdom, which we still study with profit, much less examples of character and conduct, to which we still point as wholesome and animating. Among these agencies we may even number their religion. For, false and in many respects vicious and corrupting as it was, it still tended to lift the worshipper, at times at least, above himself; it embodied, though in fantastic forms, ideas of superhuman majesty, beauty, and goodness, and presented them as objects of adoration and love; and through some of its mystical rites it may have handed down traditions of a better teaching, and have exercised a more direct, restraining, and elevating influence on the life and practice of the initiated. A like influence, confined indeed to a much smaller number of adepts, but, so far as it reached, perhaps more beneficent, was exerted by some of the schools of philosophy. Each brought to light out of the depths of the stifled and darkened conscience of mankind, some precious fragments of moral truth, which, though obscured by the admixture of manifold error, and misplaced by an artificial adjustment to arbitrary systems, still served to mark the course of a better life.

But the most powerful of all the higher principles of action in the heathen world, that which was most efficacious in overcoming the selfish tendencies of

human nature, and supplying a motive for great undertakings and heroic actions, was the spirit of patriotism. It was not the result of reasoning and reflexion, but an instinct, imbibed with the native air, the mother's milk, and continually gaining strength from every object that met the eye, from every word that fell upon the ear, from all intercourse and association into which every one was brought with his fellows, as the child grew into the man. None could escape this influence. Every one learnt to identify himself with the State, his own happiness with the common weal, so completely that he was hardly conscious of an effort or a sacrifice, when called upon to do or suffer for the public service. Even the poet of a degenerate age, who knows no end of life but the enjoyment of the passing hour, still echoes the sentiment which had stirred the hearts of the earlier generations with an emotion too deep for words, "It is sweet and becoming to die for one's country." This feeling was the more intense, the narrower its range, and glowed most fervently in those who counted every stranger—that is, every human being outside the pale of their little town—as an enemy, and expressed both ideas by the same word.

But it is just here, at the point where the heathen society of the ancient world, in its best samples, seems to show to the greatest advantage, and has won the highest admiration in modern times, that, when we look a little closer, we discover a failure and a void, which comprehends what to us, viewing it by the light of Christian

faith, appears the most important of all objects. The State claimed an absolute property in all its citizens. It held itself entitled to dispose of all their powers of body and mind, as well as of their outward possessions: to regulate all their actions and manner of living, even to the minutest particulars: to prescribe even their modes of thought and objects of belief. It not only recognized no authority above or beside its own, but allowed no right of private opinion to question that which it declared and enjoined. Whether the obedience which it exacted was in harmony with the inward convictions of its subjects, it neither knew nor cared. It was the complaint of a Greek philosopher, that no lawgiver among his countrymen had ever thought of instructing the people to perceive the reasonableness of the law as well as of enforcing the observance of it¹. In a word the State regarded the citizen not as a moral agent, but simply as an instrument for the accomplishment of its purposes. And, as was the natural consequence of such a view, all the education he received was designed to fit him for that use. It was much, often mainly, occupied with exercises of bodily strength and agility. It did not neglect the cultivation of the mental faculties. It sought to strengthen the memory, to sharpen the wit, to refine the taste. But it made the scantiest possible provision for the development of the moral being; and that incidentally rather than directly.

¹ Plato, De Leg. iv. 12.

negatively rather than positively. Its chief aim and highest achievement was to infuse an unquestioning reverence for its own authority, to curb the wilfulness of youth by a severe discipline, and to inure it to the yoke of law and custom.

When we consider the natural working of such a system of education, we may see, even without the light of experience, how shallow, how hollow, how poor in intrinsic worth, must have been all that looked the fairest on the surface of heathen society, and what a mass of moral corruption must have been fermenting below: and we are prepared to find that the final issue was that state of things which St. Paul, in complete accordance with contemporary heathen testimony, describes at the beginning of his Epistle to the Romans, who themselves had it constantly before their eyes. The contrast between this state of things and that which took its place, when and so far as the religion of the Gospel gained its rightful ascendancy, is not only matter of devout thankfulness to us who so largely share the benefit of the change, but suggests some reflections, which may not unfitly occupy our thoughts in this place on the present occasion.

If we ask what was the principle or opinion that lay at the root of the whole system which bore such deadly fruit, the answer must be, that it was no other than the same view of man, and of the value of human life, on which so many of the heathen poets and sages grounded the exhortation, which was the whole practical out-coming of all

their wisdom, to banish all thought of the future, and to make the most of that which is alone certain in our ephemeral existence, the opportunity of present enjoyment. So far as the individual was concerned, this was the best that any one was good for: this was all that made life worth having or keeping. But, though the brief span of each separate existence was worth so little, through the happy inconsistency of a better instinct, a much higher value was set on the aggregate of all these existences, and on their union in the City or the State. This was the greatest, the most venerable and majestic, the most partaking of a divine character, of all earthly objects that were presented to every one's mind. The State had a right to whatever service each was able to render: to his body and his mind, to his labour and his life. The less each counted by himself, the smaller was the sacrifice he made, even when he gave his all to the State. It was foolish as well as base to withhold from the highest of all ends, that which for any purpose of his own was so contemptible. "It is sweet and becoming," says the poet, "to die for one's country:" and he immediately adds, "Even he who flies from the field has death always at his heels." There lay the secret of much that looked like heroic self-devotion, but was indeed quite consistent with the promptings of a selfish prudence. Was it worth while to incur reproach and dishonour for the sake of so short a respite? How much better to let the consciousness of so diminutive a personality be altogether

absorbed in the thought of the commonwealth, and to live, so long as life might last, wholly in and for it !

This train of thought is, we know, in all points, from beginning to end, directly opposed to the Christian view of man and of human life. The Christian Revelation exalted the dignity of man to a height which had never before been imagined, as indeed it was then first attained. For the new announcement was, not that man was created in the Divine image, that he was an object of God's peculiar care, and capable of communion with his heavenly Father,—for so much had been not altogether hidden from the heathen themselves,—but it was that the Son of God had taken man's nature upon him, and had thus raised every partaker of that nature to a real fellowship with Himself. This fellowship was not to be a mere abstract notion, but to be consummated in an actual union, close and intimate as that between the head and the members, the Vine and the branches, and eternal as the Divine Person in whom it centres. The body in which this union is realized is the Church of Christ, and virtually it comprehends every child of man, as every one either has been or may be gathered into it. Within this great society there is room and place for every lesser unity of family, or city, or country: for the same law which breaks down all the partitions which sever man from man, at the same time strengthens all ties of particular affection by which men are bound together. But though the Church

is planted on earth, earth is too narrow for its growth, and is not its true home, but only a place of sojourn, and the wayfarers, while they tarry here, are ever lifting up their eyes and their hearts toward a better country and an eternal rest. But just herein consists the exceeding preciousness of the brief term assigned to every one's earthly pilgrimage: that it is not the whole, but only the first stage of his existence, yet that on which the character of all that follow, whether for weal or woe, has been ordained to depend. The harvest, whatever its quality, shall be only fully gathered in hereafter: but now is the short, irrecoverable seed-time.

To complete the contrast between the heathen and the Christian estimate of man, it must be observed that it is not with the heavenly as with an earthly citizenship. It is not by a merely natural process that any one can become a member of the Church, as by his birth he becomes at once a subject of the State. This was the ground on which the heathen State, as the common parent, claimed an absolute ownership over every one of its citizens, as over any natural product of its soil, treated each as the passive instrument of its will, and refused to acknowledge any right of word or deed, thought or feeling, in any of them, that might interfere with its sovereign authority. Admission into the Church of Christ is indeed an act of Divine Grace, but one which, for its completion, requires not only the intelligent consent, but the active, willing co-operation of every one who receives the blessing. The whole has no interest

apart from the welfare of each. It demands nothing from any but that which is, and which he knows, or may know, to be best for himself. And so it can be only through ignorance, and short-sightedness, that any one ever desires for himself that which does not tend to the good of the whole. The union can be perfected only by the full development of each individual capacity; and the nearer it approaches its perfection, the more it does away with all separate wishes, aims, and strivings: so that "none liveth for himself, and no man dieth for himself;" but "whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it, or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it."

So man was restored to his rightful dignity of a free person, a moral agent, with all its high privileges and awful responsibilities. He could no longer be compared to the beasts that perish. It might be long before all were awakened to the full consciousness of their higher nature: but that which had been so won could never more be lost, and must be more and more acknowledged as the inalienable birth-right of every human being. By this revelation man was brought into his true position with regard to all around him. His view was no longer bounded by the horizon of any particular association: his sympathies no longer pent within any range narrower than that which embraced the universal brotherhood of mankind. His affections were drawn out to every member of the whole family in heaven and earth. And as his thoughts and feelings were no longer fastened to

the point of space which he happened to occupy, but stretched forth to an infinite distance, and soared to invisible worlds, so the brief span of mortal existence ceased to be the measure of his enjoyments and his aspirations. Its shortness did not exclude undying hopes, or forbid far-reaching plans. It was not now folly, but the highest wisdom, to live rather in the remote future than in the immediate present, or in the present chiefly with a view to the future; to plant that others may rest in the shade or reap the fruit; to build for others to dwell.

The face of Christendom has been covered with monuments of this large-hearted and far-sighted benevolence. And it is very observable that none such date higher than the coming of Christ. It is true that institutions, manifesting such a provident care for the well-being of after generations, had begun to spring up in Imperial Rome, while it was yet a heathen and a persecuting power; but not before the old Pagan society, though outwardly unchanged, had been deeply leavened with Christian ideas: and we have therefore reason to regard all these charitable foundations, though the work of heathen hands, as embodiments of the Christian principle, and as a kind of first-fruits of the Gospel. After the faith of Christ had become the religion of the civilized world, such institutions were multiplied in proportion to the increased ability of their founders. These institutions branched into a great variety of forms, according to the manifold needs, physical and spiritual, of mankind.

But the common principle which lay at the root of all, and which supplied the motive for every exertion and sacrifice which they required, was a tender concern for the highest interests of those who in succeeding ages should become members of the Church of Christ. It was, however, to be expected, that the impulse, while remaining essentially the same, should take different directions, according to the shifting light of public opinion, and that it should sometimes be misguided, and waste itself in error or extravagance.

There has never been a period in the history of the Church, when the rearing of her children in the faith and fear of God was not regarded as an object of the highest importance, and a permanent provision for that purpose as one of the noblest works of Christian charity. Schools for the young were often attached to institutions mainly designed for ends more purely religious, as the public worship of God. It was generally felt that there was a natural and almost necessary connexion between the two objects; not only that the seat of learning was most fitly placed by the side of the house of prayer, but that the house of prayer lacked somewhat of its completeness, unless within its precincts some place was dedicated to the work of religious education. They were as two branches growing out of one stem, and fed by the same sap. But during a long lapse of ages, the Christian mind was impressed with the belief, that an entire seclusion from the world—not merely from its sinful pleasures, from its greedy covetousness, from its

grasping ambition, or its fierce contentions, but from its most innocent, lawful, useful pursuits, from its purest joys and holiest ties,—that such a seclusion was the most acceptable of all offerings to God, and the state nearest to angelic perfection; and to provide for the multiplying of such retreats of an unenlightened piety was deemed the best employment of wealth. When, at the Reformation, these institutions came to be viewed in the light of a purer faith and a clearer knowledge, as the merit of that alienation from the common concerns of life which they were designed to promote, was utterly denied, so their value, even when no account was taken of the abuses which experience had shown to be practically inseparable from their constitution, sank as low as it had once stood high, in public estimation. That which had long been the object of a blind reverence, became the mark of a furious hatred. The treasures which had been accumulated by a pious though misdirected munificence, were too often either wantonly scattered and destroyed, or applied to purposes not more generally useful than those to which they had been dedicated, and far less entitled to respect. But the genuine spirit of our Reformed Church manifested itself, not in such outbursts of fanatical rage, or clutchings of private greediness, but in the thoughtful charity with which means, which could no longer be permitted to serve their original destination, were made to minister to better ends. Institutions which had been always hotbeds of superstition, not unfrequently of vice, were

transformed into nurseries of youth for the rearing of successive generations for the service of God in Church and State: thus at the same time supplying the most urgent need of the commonwealth, and (though not in the letter, in the spirit) fulfilling the true intentions of the founders.

The building in which we are assembled is one of many monuments of such vicissitudes. Erected for a community of an Order unhappily distinguished as the most active instrument of religious persecution in the Church of Rome, it was set apart for the exercises of a sober and peaceful piety, and was connected with a new seat of useful learning. This happy conjunction has lasted, not indeed without frequent interruption, through many changes of good and evil days, to our own time. And it has now been revived, with a fairer aspect and a brighter promise than it appears to have presented at any previous period of its history. The walls within which we meet are the only, but the most precious remains of the ancient sanctuary. And they have been restored in a manner which can leave little of their primitive form to regret. And by their side has risen a new home of liberal studies, in which, we may venture to say, the design of the Founder has been for the first time worthily realized, and in a measure probably far exceeding his own conceptions. In all the variety of outward forms through which the institution has passed, the substance has been still the same. What is that substance? What shall it be? Our text gives the answer:

“The holy seed shall be,” as it has hitherto been, “the substance thereof.”

There is indeed a closer agreement between the prophet's image and the peculiar circumstances of our case, than appears in the received version of the text. For it seems to speak of the familiar change in the face of nature, by which the tree, after having lost its foliage in the autumn, renews it in the spring. But that which is signified by the original expression, is not a shedding of leaves, but a felling of the stem. Even when the tree has been cut down—the Prophet says—and nothing remains of it but a stock hardly rising above the ground, still in that stock the vegetable life is not extinct; it shall yet send forth fresh shoots, and be clothed with new verdure. That was the Prophet's message of comfort for Israel, when it should be brought down, even to the ground. Even in that low estate, life and hope should not be lost. A remnant should be left, sufficient to preserve and transmit the inheritance of the promise, and be quickened by the “holy seed,” the spirit of the Holy One, which had ever been the germ and substance of its true national life. The same may be said of every plant which our Heavenly Father has planted. And the image does not reach to the fulness of the truth. For every such tree, though laid prostrate by the tempest, or by the violence of man, may not only survive and grow anew, but may flourish in more than its pristine beauty and vigour.

Let us hope and pray that it may be so with the new form of this ancient institution: that the

glory of this latter house may be greater than of the former. But let us also remember what is the only sure ground of such a hope, the only sufficient warrant for such a prayer. The original principle of the institution is likewise the indispensable condition of its vitality. However it may grow and spread and show fair to the eye, should it cease to be nourished by the Holy Seed, it will never bear such fruit as Christ looks for, and that barrenness will be both evidence of inward decay, and a foretokening of impending ruin. That intimate union of religion and learning, which was the guiding thought of the Founder, is the only pledge of the Divine blessing which can ensure both the real usefulness and the perpetuity of his work. It will prosper in proportion as it continues to be hallowed by that union. Those who are trained within these precincts are to be treated, not as creatures of a day, but as heirs of immortality: to be formed into citizens, not of a heathen, but of a Christian state: members, not of an earthly society only, but of the Church of Christ. Only in the assurance, that this will be the constant aim of all who do and shall minister in this work, can we have a right to pray, with humble confidence, that God would be pleased to pour upon this tender plant the continual dew of His blessing, so that it may wax into a goodly tree, and may enrich the generations to come with the fruits of righteousness, to the glory of His Holy Name.





