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> This is a Plea for the Middle Classes by Rev. W. Woodard.

21
John L. Tall
How shall the Parish Feast be dealt with?

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. MARY'S, BEDFORD,

ON WEDNESDAY, JULY 7, 1858,

AT THE VISITATION OF THE LORD BISHOP OF ELY,

BY

J. HARRIES THOMAS, M.A.,

RECTOR OF MILLBROOK, AND PRIEST IN ORDINARY TO
HER MAJESTY.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

TO WHICH IS ADDED A PASTORAL LETTER.

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A SERMON, &c.

ST. LUKE xii. 35—38.

Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning; and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord, when He will return from the wedding; that, when He cometh and knocketh, they may open unto Him immediately. Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that He shall gird Himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them. And if He shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants.

REVEREND BRETHEREN,—No Christian man could listen to such words as these without feeling their solemn warning to prepare for the advent of the Lord to judgment. And to us, “messengers, watchmen, and stewards of the Lord,” they come with a special meaning. It may be, that when we heard them as the appointed Gospel at our ordination, many of us shrank from the fearful responsibility implied; that like St. Peter, we would fain have answered, “Lord, speakest Thou this parable unto us, or unto all?” that like that apostle, we would willingly have hidden ourselves among such an “innumerable multitude^a” as then surrounded Christ, and so have thrown off from ourselves any marked

^a St. Luke xii. 1.

and individual application of them. And there is, perhaps, not one who in hours of trial and despondency, on realizing the awfulness of his commission, and the unceasing watchfulness supposed by it, and placing side by side with these his mournful failures and broken resolutions; on viewing the sin around which he seemed powerless to check, and the sin within which intruded into the very holiest ministrations; there is, perhaps, not one but has asked himself, "Why did I not choose some easier course than this? why did I not follow a secular calling instead of receiving the burden of other souls? why am I placed so that if I fall it is not I alone, but others perish with me?"

But it is too late now. Our Lord tells us, "No man having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." The vows once taken are past recal. They encircle us so that it were better not to have been born, than to become false to them. We are pledged in the sight of God, and angels, and men, never to cease our labour while work remains to be done and power remains to do it. We must give ourselves "to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine," as those who know that "the time is short;" we must bend all our energy to the great work of saving souls for Christ; we must be "instant in season and out of season," as those who believe that (in the words of Chrysostom) "then only will it be no time to reprove when our reproof shall have taken effect."

And when once we realize the urgent necessity of being ever on the watch for Christ, of ever taking heed that our lamps burn brightly, we shall think every matter of detail of consequence. The sum of our work is made of details, for each of which we must be prepared. Therefore it is that I venture to ask your attention, not to any large circle of our duties, which could only hastily be glanced at in the time allotted me, but to a single item of them,—*our mode of dealing with the Annual Parish Feast*. It is a more important subject than at first sight appears. If the Feast now gathers up, and brings to a centre, much of the evil going on in our parishes through the rest of the year; and if it be possible, God helping us, to find means of lessening this evil, and even of drawing out good; then it must be a vital question with us how we may use such a time to “maintain and set forward, as much as lieth in us, quietness, peace, and love, among them that are committed to our charge.” One consideration, especially, must make the Feast of great interest to ourselves,—the interest it creates in our people. We cannot safely neglect a day which is looked forward to, and dated from, in our village annals; a day when the usually sluggish current of rural life is stirred into activity. Wherever men’s minds are opened to more than wonted feeling, *there* surely is needed our sympathy with it, if good; our rebuke of it, if evil; our direction of it, if good and evil combined. In the terrors of soul caused by sudden

illness or sorrow, in the joy of unlooked-for prosperity, in the various events of family life,—the birth, marriage, or death,—we see occasions which afford point for a word in season. And the Feast-time, with its excitement, is in some degree to the whole parish what such events are to the individual families of it: its heart is aroused, and we must seize the opportunity of reaching it.

With no further apology, then, for the subject itself, (although much might be offered for the way of treating it,) let us enquire what was the intention of our Feasts? One authority may serve. Mr. Soames says^b, “The Anglo-Saxon churches were separated regularly from profane uses by the imposing ceremony of episcopal consecration. . . . Nor was its memory allowed to fall into oblivion, but annual solemnities taught the surrounding population to hail the happy day which had opened a House of God within easy distance. Of this ancient religious holiday traces linger yet in our country villages. The petty feast or fair, now merely a provocative to rustic revelry, commonly originated in the day when episcopal benediction hallowed that venerable pile which has trained so many generations for immortality.” The leading thought, then, was essentially religious. The parish priest was in his place at the head of his parishioners; and together they kept “the dedication with gladness.” Families and

^b Anglo-Saxon Church, p. 281.

friends mixed upon a day which was then, as now, one of the greatest in the year. After service, they naturally desired to spend the rest of the day in social festivity. The heathen, who had become Christians, were also persuaded to exchange their idol-sacrifices for Feasts in honour of the true God^c; and so was introduced the secular element, which has at last overridden the religious. The family-gathering has degenerated into the low revel, and the Church-service has, for the most part, been given up. But it is instructive to find that it was very long before the entire reversion of the original idea took place. Even so lately as the year 1631, there is record of a scrutiny in the diocese of Bath and Wells as to the manner in which Feast-days were celebrated; from which we learn, that on the bishop "advising with seventy-two of the most orthodox and able of his clergy, they certified,—that on these Feast-days, which usually fell on a Sunday, the service of God was more solemnly performed, and the Church better frequented, both forenoon and afternoon, than on any other Sunday in the year; that the people very much desired the continuance of them; that the ministers in most places did the like, for these reasons, viz. for preserving the memorial of the dedication of their several churches, for civilizing the people, for composing differences by the mediation and meeting of friends, for increase of

^c Bede, Hist., lib. i. cap. xxx.

love and unity by these means of charity, and for relief and comfort of the poor^d.”

Now, after making some allowance for the spirit which may have influenced a scrutiny undertaken at the instance of Archbishop Laud, it seems clear that the Somersetshire Feasts of that day must have produced much good, religious and social: yet these were at least not better than those in other districts, since they were chosen by the Puritans as objects of special attack. We have, therefore, not only the design of institution, but the fact of their right observance only a few generations back, to serve as our guide. So far as any religious idea now remains, it is shewn, in some parishes, by larger congregations on the Sunday before, by children being then brought to baptism, relations and friends coming in and acting as sponsors. But there is sad evil behind: numbers of those who are at church in the afternoon will be found drinking at the public-houses in the evening; and on the Feast night itself, often on other nights also, there are the riot, drunkenness, and quarrels of the dancing-booth, so that many are carried into the grossest sin of body and soul.

What course, then, should we take about our Feasts? Is it enough to shew silent disapproval, or to be content with a few warning words in the pulpit or the school? Are we justified in keeping clear of them altogether, and leaving the more vio-

^d See Steer's Parish Law, pp. 24, 25.

lent outbreaks to be dealt with by the police? Many of my brethren, I know, after anxiously considering the matter, have come to the conclusion that it is better for the clergy to avoid all interference with them, and to leave the responsibility to the law. Let us therefore enquire how far it can help us.

It appears that there is no special law applicable to the closing or regulation of public-houses at the Feast. The booths then usually attached to them are not allowed to obstruct the street beyond a certain fixed period, but the publicans may have them upon their own premises, and keep their houses open all night except Saturday and Sunday. There is even less check upon them than at other times, because, although the annual publican's licence is granted to each with the proviso that he "do not wilfully or knowingly permit drunkenness or other disorderly conduct in his house or premises, and do not knowingly permit or suffer persons of notoriously bad character to assemble and meet together therein," yet this is practically a dead letter at the Feast, the police being unwilling to inform, and the magistrates to adhere to the strict reading of the law, at a time when its transgression is considered more or less a matter of course.

The law cannot be of much service to us, and if it could, I think we ought to be ashamed to ask it. It is not given us in order to bear the burden of a spiritual reformation, which is what is really needed here. The more riotous outbreaks might

possibly be checked by it, but the better nature of the people would be untouched the while. It would be as if a surgeon were to content himself with driving in a bad sore by a burning ointment, and, satisfied with the healed skin, forgot that an ulcer would now rage beneath, and reach the vitals. We must be prepared to use the law as our resource in extremity, never to abuse it by clinging to it as our mainstay in spiritual work. To make it our dependence would be sadly to underrate our vocation as priests in the dispensation of the Holy Ghost. It would be to substitute outward decency for the changed heart of our flocks. It would be to declare that He who has ever breathed forth such gifts of His blessed Spirit as were necessary for the varying wants of His Church, could not grant us strength in this our age to meet and conquer the difficulties about us.

And again, our chief anxiety must be, not for the hardened who have been given over to serve their own lusts greedily, but for those who may be drawn for the first time into evils which result in such a death of body and soul. It is of little consequence, comparatively, whether the habitual drunkard or adulterer adds one more to his long list of sins; but if the boy, led on the Feast night to take his first cup too much, is one whom you prepared with deep anxiety for Confirmation, one for whom you pleaded on your knees before God that he might find mercy in the Day of Judgment; if he passes

you by after the Feast without a look of recognition, (simply because the sight of you reminds him of God, whom he is trying to forget,) and so declares plainly the line he intends to take for the future; then you have indeed a spiritual grief, and yet the law cannot touch it. Or if you hear that on the Feast night some girl, whose worst faults were weakness and love of dress, and who had become of late more open to a word of kind warning; if you hear that she was led into sin which has brought shame upon her parents and sorrow into her home, it is a case a thousandfold more distressing than that of the poor sinworn woman led off by the police for an outbreak more violent than common. It is one seeming well-nigh irreparable, and yet no law could have prevented it.

The real remedy seems to lie in *the restoration of the Feast to its old purpose*. The religious element is dying out, if not dead; let us seek to pour fresh life into it. The social element is degraded, let us seek to raise it. The leverage is providentially given us, we have but to use it in faith, and it will become strong. Religiously, our method of action will differ with the differing circumstances of our parishes; but, speaking generally, it seems that if the minds of the people are full of the subject for weeks before, then the teaching for those weeks should bear upon it, directly or indirectly. If the hearts of the congregation are occupied with a thought, it is the simplest rule of effective preaching that our words

should speak to it, instead of "beating the air." A pastoral letter, very plainly written, dealing in local allusions and the actual condition of the parish, would be read and talked about^f. The better mind of the people should be appealed to, the young warned, the earnest encouraged, the communicants exhorted to give special prayer for a better observance of the Feast; and upon the Sunday before, and at a special service upon the day itself, there might be pointed, telling sermons, to shew the blessings or evils which must result from its being well or badly kept.

As to the social or secular element, it would clearly be unwise and wrong merely to abolish low pleasures, (even were this possible,) without sanctioning or providing better. Here, as upon higher ground, "it is seldom of much use to shew one who worships idols the folly of idolatry, without giving something else as an object of adoration instead^g." Our learned Hooker says, "He that will take away extreme heat by setting the body in extremity of cold, shall undoubtedly remove the disease, but together with it the diseased too^h." There is a natural desire for the recreation of body and mind which it is our work to try and keep healthy. We protest against the coarseness and riot of the dancing-booth,

^f At the request of some of the clergy, publicly made, a letter addressed last year to my own parishioners has been subjoined to the present sermon.

^g Livingstone, p. 287.

^h Book IV. ch. viii. 1.

then we must afford a substitute, something purer and better. We must rejoice to see our people employed in innocent amusements of any kind. On one night of the Feast, some simple schoolroom entertainment would present an attraction which would keep many from the public-houses. And by our interest in the family gatherings, of which some of our own old school-children would form part, by an evident desire for the real happiness of our people, and by earnest sympathy with them, we might shew in time that we were only anxious that they should thoroughly enjoy themselves.

We must, however, expect difficulties at the outset; and these from two opposite parties: one consisting of the idle and riotous, who will represent us as enemies for interfering with their own mode of enjoyment; the other of religionists who put a ban upon every recreation of soul and body not directly devotional. With the first we can have neither parley nor compromise; but with the second we must deal wisely and cautiously, or we may find ourselves unawares hopelessly separated from some who ought to be our best friends. They are now indisposed to tolerate any middle way of dealing with evil, and look upon a game at cricket, or a Sunday walk after church, as positive sin. Some of them we can only think of with extreme respect; they are exceedingly earnest, and must be dealt with considerately. It is easy to see how their views have been formed. Their notion of pleasure

is that of coarse, animal enjoyment: they cannot hide from themselves the debasing effect of this; they have not had the opportunity of seeing how the word *recreation* may express the making anew powers which God has given, or how *relaxation* (as Dean Trench explains) is "the slackening of the bow, drawn tight by earnest toil¹." And therefore, upon grasping the truths of eternity, they are jealous of any attempt to introduce objects bearing the name of pleasures, as if it were a subtle device of Satan to open a byeway to destruction. And their scruples should be treated *tenderly*, but at the same time *manfully*. They, as well as others, must be shewn that this so-called spirituality is in itself most unspiritual; that those who cherish it, well-meaning as they often are, and leading lives which may put many of ours to shame, are yet in this respect "seeing as in a glass, darkly," the joy which God has given us here; that those who look with displeasure upon the very sports of children, as if they were "signs of the unregenerate heart," have no true feeling of "the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free," and of the mind of Him who has, perhaps, set before us the example of little children for this amongst other reasons,—that with a frank, loving spirit they enjoy without suspicion the good springing around them.

And further, when we come to the results of the unnatural banishment of recreation, we cannot but

¹ Study of Words, p. 201.

see that sons and daughters become intolerant of the bondage in which their parents placed them. Religion was represented as something so hard, so separate from themselves; they were taught to fear God because far from Him, not to love Him as their Father; they learnt that all crimes were equal in the sight of God, so that there was no medium between thorough conversion and gross sinfulness; and they have made the comment in their own sad fashion. Mournful cases, indeed, are those in which such a one-sided view of Christian doctrine has been given, it may be in all sincerity, by religious parents, that it became hateful to their children, who have, therefore, plunged into the depths of sin.

For the sake, then, both of parents and children, it should be shewn how God has so wonderfully knit together "body, soul, and spirit," that the highest destiny of all is promoted by a cheerful, happy frame of mind. When innocent recreations are denied, this harmony is impaired, and strange is it if no monstrous form of crime results, becoming an avenger of the perverted teaching which made God a hard taskmaster instead of a loving Father.

But if these and other difficulties are against us in any attempt to restore the Feast to its primitive idea, I would remind you, reverend brethren, (as most of all I would remind myself,) that there is one course more difficult, more impossible than any other, namely, to pass over evil without even trying to check it. It seems one of the necessities of our position

as parish priests, that we cannot allow a time when it may be considered a venial offence to sin; that we cannot keep silence where words of affectionate warning or sharp rebuke are most needed; that we cannot connive at rioting and drunkenness, whether it be at harvest-homes or parish Feasts. When such seasons are at hand, surely then if ever is a time when we must not be shut up in our studies, but abroad in our parishes; a time when "our loins must be girded about, and our lights burning, and we ourselves like men that wait for their Lord." We may, perhaps, fail and be driven back again and again in seeking to grapple with the evil; we must expect this; but if we feel that it were nobler to be defeated a thousand times than to gain inglorious victory by letting things alone, it is a great comfort to know that the better minds of the people will second all we do. The Feast is a scandal to the right thinking; and many even of those who go take with them sad and doubtful hearts, led away, as they themselves own, by the power of the temptation.

And if the possibility of reformation is doubted, I would point to the present state of the Norfolk harvest festivals as a proof that we need not despair. What could have appeared more unmanageable than harvest-homes, especially when kept at public-houses? How often had they been scenes of riot, blasphemy, and hard drinking! Yet now, in many parishes, farmers, labourers, and their families

begin by going to church to give God thanks for the harvest; they then spend the afternoon together in amusements, and after an evening meal quietly disperse. And the men themselves acknowledge that the new way is the better one^k. May we not look forward to such a celebration of the Feast-day? A glorious contrast, indeed, would there then be! The Feast is *but* a memorial of sins to which each year adds its heap in passing. It tells of many a saddened heart and grievous fall in generations that are gone. It speaks to many a mother of her daughter's shame, to many a son of his father's drunkenness. It places beacons in the course of many an evil life, from the first temptation yielded to, to the last cup of the drunkard tottering into his grave. It *might be* (in our children's time, if not our own,) a memorial of joyful thanksgiving to God for the blessings of His Church; for the growing mercies of each returning season; for the innocent amusement bringing no sorrow with it; for the happy gathering of families, to which (as once to the feast of Cana) it might be recorded that "both Jesus was called and His disciples."

But such a change, even if it can be wrought in our day, implies more self-sacrifice and devotion than at first sight appears; for it can be attained by no spasmodic effort once in the year. Our power to act efficiently at the critical times of our people's need

^k See a Lecture on Harvest Thanksgivings, by the Rev. E. Jacson. (Masters: 1857.)

must depend upon our bearing at ordinary times. The sailor who cannot manage his vessel in a calm will be helpless indeed if a storm comes and seas begin to break over her. When Sir James Brooke went on his great enterprise to Borneo, it was with a crew which he could trust as his right hand; but he had trained them for the dangers of the Indian Archipelago by home service in the Mediterranean. And in our spiritual work we must seek for men's love and trust in the every-day routine of our parishes, if we would influence them when their feelings and passions are aroused. If they find us worldly, indolent, luxurious, self-seeking, following our own pleasures greedily while trying to change or raise theirs,—then away with any hope of effectual good! Our lives will witness against us, and for very shame we shall speak with a faltering, uncertain voice. But if we are ever desiring to “make full proof of our ministry,” as those who know that “the Judge standeth before the door;” if we are ever watchful, so “that when He cometh and knocketh, we may open unto Him immediately;” then we may humbly trust that He will hear our prayer, and pour out His Holy Spirit upon us and our people; so that through His infinite merits and mediation many shall be brought out of trial and temptation, and be presented faultless before the throne of God.

A PASTORAL LETTER.

MILLBROOK FEAST.

MY DEAR FRIENDS,

You may perhaps feel, when you get a letter from me about the Feast, that I am meddling in what I have nothing to do with; and so I tell you at once, that I am only desirous that you may enjoy the Feast as much as possible. Many of you will be surprised to hear that no one can have been thinking about it more than I. Indeed, nothing which affects your happiness can ever fail to be full of the deepest interest to myself.

And now, let me tell you what my thoughts were, at first, about the Feast. I said, "How glad I am that these dear people should be going to have a holiday! They have been working hard, and they ought to have a little innocent pleasure. The children will rejoice in their toys and cakes; the boys and young men in a game of cricket. The girls will rest from their lace-making or straw-plaiting. The old will look on, and prevent any mischief from following. All this will be a sight to enjoy."

But after enquiring whether the Feast was really anything like this, I found that, on the contrary, it is a serious harm to the parish. I was told that swearing, drunkenness, and riot are common; that there is a dancing-booth open almost all night; that girls go there, so dressed out that no one would know them,—looking half ashamed, indeed, of their

own finery. After this account, I felt that, God helping me, I would try to shew you how these evils may be avoided, and yet the Feast be kept most happily.

Now, some of you may say,—“The Feast has gone on for a great number of years, and has always been kept in the same way. Besides, there are Feasts everywhere. They cannot therefore be quite wrong. There must be some good in the Feast!”

Yes, I quite agree with you that there must be some good in it; there must be good at the bottom. But we must go down a good way to find it; just as the Duke’s men were obliged to dig a good way down before they came to water in the well which had been so long stopped up at Little End. Indeed, Millbrook Feast is something like that well. The good of it has been for a long time *stopped up*. As for the Feast itself, it really has not always been kept in the same way as now it is kept. Far from it.

The Feast is, perhaps, eight or nine hundred years old; and it began in this way:—After our church had been built, to the glory of God, it was set apart to Him by the name of Saint Michael (one of His angels); and so our Feast came to be held on Saint Michael’s Day, or, as we now call it, Old Michaelmas Day. On that day, people used to go to church, and offer up a hearty service of prayer and praise; and blessings were asked from God for the year to come. Then, too, there was a happy gathering of friends; children came home from place; quarrels were made up, and there was plenty of merriment. Thus Saint Michael’s Day became one of the greatest in the year for Millbrook; but, of course, there were no “drunkenness, revellings, and such like,” or so holy a day would not have been chosen for the

Feast. The parson of the parish had also his full share in the pleasure of that day, as well as the people.

But now, all thoughts of God seem clean put away. His Name is only heard in oaths. Fresh quarrels are begun, instead of old quarrels being made up. Few families meet for any good purpose; few children who come home make their parents happier; and many a sad hour do fathers and mothers pass, as they sit silent by their firesides, in fear for what their children are about amidst the riot over the hill. How often does a man return from the Feast reeling with drink for the first time! How often does a girl go up in the evening, just to look about, and sorrows for it ever after! Surely this is dreadful. Yet, Feast after Feast, we keep on doing the same thing; following the same bad example. How is it that we will not take warning? will not see that for these things God will bring us into judgment?

Tell me, young men and young women,—would you like to die the day after you had spent hours in the dancing-booth? No others with you *then*; no music, no noise about you to drown care; but your own soul brought face to face with Death! Are filthy songs, and disgusting oaths, and indecent talk, any preparation for joining in the hymns of angels and the songs of the redeemed in the great Feast of heaven? If not, I entreat you, as your truest and best friend, do not rush into the follies of the Feast: do not take any part in them. Do not enter the public-house or the dancing-booth at all; and if you go to the stalls, let it be only in broad daylight. Try and bring back the Feast to what it used to be in old times: come to church one and all, and let us be heartily in earnest there. Many of you enjoyed

the harvest service, and sang the hymns as if you meant them. Be of the same mind now, and we may then really believe that God will bless us in our family gatherings and our innocent amusement.

Pray help me in this matter, all of you. The fathers and mothers will be on my side, I know: I am sure the children will. I will never believe, till they tell me so, that the young women will grieve my heart by acting immodestly, and gadding to the fair after dusk. The young men of Millbrook will surely desire to set a good example to others. I, for my part, shall be ready to give you all the help I can. Do let us, one and all, turn over a new leaf, and try to make our Feast *a blessing* and not *a curse*. Think of the day,—Old Saint Michael's Day. We should remember what God gives His holy angels charge to do for us. He sets them to watch what we are about. They know whether we pray for Christ to be with us, "in our going out and coming in;" whether we put ourselves into any company where we cannot ask Him to be with us, as He was at the Feast of Cana; whether we think pure, right thoughts, and speak gentle, modest words. How must the angels be grieved, how must the God of the angels be offended, at all the sin of our Feast! at seeing Christian men brought lower than the very animals; young girls losing shame, talking at random, laughing loudly, trying with all their might to destroy every good thought which God's Holy Spirit puts into their hearts!

Then, for the love of Christ who died for you, be warned against such a way of spending this next Feast-time! Do not mind the scoffs and jeers of others. So only can you have part in that beautiful promise of the ninety-first Psalm,—“Because thou

hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the Most High, thy habitation; there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. For He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone."

And now, with the most earnest hope and prayer that you may not only read this letter through, but really ask God to teach you how to keep the Feast rightly, believe me, ever

YOUR FAITHFUL FRIEND AND PASTOR.

MILLBROOK RECTORY,

Oct. 6, 1857.

On Monday Evening, October 12, there will be (God willing,) A SPECIAL SERVICE, and the FEAST SERMON, at Seven o'clock.

PRAYERS at Half-past Seven in the Morning, every day in the Week, with a very short Address.

On Tuesday Evening, the Magic Lantern, at Seven o'clock, in the Schoolroom.





