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9
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21
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NATIONAL EDUCATION.

Preached on the 2nd Sunday after Epiphany, January 19th, 1902,
in St. Margaret's, Westminster, on the occasion of the
first Sunday in the Session of Parliament.

BY

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Westminster.*

PRINTED BY REQUEST.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY WIGHTMAN MOUNTAIN & ANDREWS, LTD., 31, VICTORIA STREET, S.W.

1902.

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Sermon

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Rev. CANON H. HENSLEY HENSON, B.D.

“AND WISDOM IS JUSTIFIED BY HER WORKS.”—*S. Mattheu* xi. 19.

THE occasion on which these words were spoken by Christ was of singular and pathetic interest. The message which the imprisoned Baptist sent to Him, whom he had publicly acknowledged as Messiah, seems to uncover to view a spiritual conflict, which it is not hard to understand, and with which it is impossible not to sympathize. Christ, in the full tide of His transient popularity, seemed strangely forgetful of the desert preacher, whom He had displaced in the popular favour, and to whom, none the less, He stood bound by great obligation. Did He disown, and desire to forget, that great ministry of repentance which had prepared His advent? He was the Messiah, whose way in the world must thus be made straight; how, then, could He ignore and leave to his fate in Herod's dungeon the Messenger of the Covenant? Or, could the truth be rather that the Baptist had been deceived by the ardour of his own enthusiasm, that he, too, had mistaken the signs of the time, and that Messiah was yet to come?

“*Now when John heard in the prison the works of the Christ, he sent by his disciples, and said unto him, Art Thou he that cometh, or look we for another?*” Our Lord replies by bidding the envoys take back a faithful description of His works, adding a very gentle message, half remonstrance, half benediction—“*And blessed is he, whosoever shall find none occasion of stumbling in Me.*” The

messengers having retired, Christ pursues the train of thought which their arrival has started in His mind. The personal failure of the Baptist, following upon a public ministry of extraordinary power and success, was suggestive of melancholy speculation as to the conditions under which such ministries must be fulfilled in the world.

Christ Himself was even then engaged on the same task as that which had carried the Baptist to the impotence and obscurity of imprisonment. He was preaching to the same unstable multitude, and, though His manner of life and ministry were different, yet there were even then signs that He would be no more successful in winning or retaining the popular approbation. The same persons who complained of the Baptist's asceticism were now finding fault with Christ's social tolerance. Their attitude was that of petulant children, who will not be satisfied. *"Whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the market places, which call unto their fellows, and say, We piped unto you, and ye did not dance: we wailed and ye did not mourn. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking and they say, Behold a gluttonous man and a winebibber! And wisdom is justified by her works."*

We have the key to the meaning of the text in some words which may, perhaps, be a comment of St. Luke, but which, I think, may very well be understood to be part of Christ's speech. Having described the greatness of John the Baptist, the Evangelist, or Christ Himself, notices the endorsement of his message which the penitents, who received it, freely rendered. *"And all the people, when they heard, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected for themselves the counsel of God, being not baptized of him."*

In like manner the vindication of Christ's own ministry would be found in the free acknowledgments of *"the children*

SERMON.

of wisdom," those simple and honest folk, who without prejudice would face the "*works*" of wisdom, and draw the inevitable inference from their quality and effect. It makes no real difference to the sense of the text whether we read, with the Revisers, "*works*," or with the "many ancient authorities," to whom they refer in their margin, "*children*." In a true sense, the "*children of wisdom*" are also the *works* of wisdom; and, certainly, they are the agents through whom those works are wrought. But I must not detain you longer with questions of interpretation, for our Saviour's words must serve us on this occasion rather as a general statement of principle, which holds good in the whole sphere of human action, than as a particular judgment on an episode of the Evangelic history. "*Wisdom is justified by her works*." The demonstration of the rightness of any course of conduct, of any policy, of any system, lies in its actual effects.

You will permit me to apply this truth to the case of our national education. A whole generation has passed since the present system was established, and we are, as citizens, faced by the necessity of revising it; nay, I do not go beyond the facts, or pass outside the general agreement, when I say that the Government stands towards the nation pledged, as deeply as any Government could be pledged, to deal promptly, effectually, and, as far as human wisdom can secure, finally, with the problem of revising the existing educational system.

At such a time, therefore, it would seem the duty of every good citizen to apply his mind, and, so far as his influence extends, to induce others to do as much, to this subject, in order that the action of Government may be stimulated, sustained, and sanctioned by a watchful, intelligent, and steady public opinion. It does not seem an extravagant claim, that of all citizens the Clergy are on this question especially bound to express their minds; for the Clergy, under the existing

SERMON.

system, are generally responsible for the maintenance and conduct of the elementary schools.

It is the case at this moment that most of the elementary schools in the country are to a very large extent under clerical control; and, therefore, it would be unreasonable to accuse a clergyman of travelling outside the lines of his duty, when (as I intend to do this morning) he directly considers educational questions in the pulpit. On this occasion my parochial duty coincides with the general obligation which I have described. I have to ask you, not merely to continue your support of the National Schools in this parish, but substantially to increase it. The Churchwardens and I have decided to allot four Sundays in the year for making collections for these schools, instead of three as heretofore; and even so, I have to tell you that unless your contributions are more liberal than in the past, our schools must fall into debt, and, within a few years, fail altogether.

You will understand, therefore, that I am compelled, against my wishes, to draw your attention to a matter, which, at least in its most prominent aspect, is less religious than political.

Now the situation which I have described in this parish is representative. All over the country the Voluntary Schools are in sore straits.

If I were an advocate of merely secular education, or for what, in principle, is the same thing, for universal School Boards of the existing type, I should simply adopt a policy of educational obstruction. Maintain the present law for a few years longer, and the "intolerable strain" will have done its work. One after another the Voluntary Schools are perishing; many have perished within the last few months; many more will perish within the next few years. It is a mere matter of time when the whole system collapses.

Even this is not the whole truth. Poverty is having its effect on our schools. Our school buildings are generally

SERMON.

inferior ; our teachers are, for the most part, worse paid, and, as an inevitable consequence, we do not often get the ablest teachers ; our educational plant is, as a rule, not equal to that of the rate-supported schools. Religious teaching is becoming associated in the popular mind with educational inefficiency ; and we cannot wonder if the shallower sort of politician infers that the association is natural and inevitable, instead of being the consequence of untoward conditions. There is no likelihood of any improvement. In spite of what optimists may say in public, it is well known and freely confessed in private, that the reluctance of the Anglican laity to contribute to the support of voluntary schools grows daily greater, that their resentment against the injustice implied in the¹ necessity to contribute is becoming stronger than their desire, at all hazards, to maintain religious schools, that they are more and more disposed to leave the education question to take its course.

The Voluntary Schools, then, are in a critical condition ; as I see the facts, and I know well that I am expressing opinions which are frankly confessed in assemblies of Churchmen, there is, under existing circumstances, nothing before them but steadily waxing inefficiency, caused by lack of requisite income, and, sooner or later, ignominious extinction. The question, therefore, must be asked, and pressed—What is the actual worth of those schools to the Nation ? Ought they to be slowly starved out of existence, and their places taken by the Board Schools we know so well ? Or, do they represent something of enduring value, which ought to be established in a revised national system ? Shortly, I would answer that the Voluntary Schools embody two thoroughly sound principles. In the first place, they embody the principle that school management ought to be permanent and personal. There is, perhaps, no sphere within which continuity is more important than in the sphere of education. The salutary influence of a school is far more the creation of settled traditions and moral atmosphere than of syllabuses and didactic

SERMON.

methods. In a good Voluntary School, where the Clergy do their duty, there grow up a public spirit, a tone of manliness and deference, a settled temper, which wonderfully colour the education, and affect for good the children educated in it.

No doubt the teachers, and especially the head teachers, are mainly responsible for this ; but the Clergy also are teachers, and they are generally the principal managers ; and they often represent in their own persons great educational traditions and a distinterested zeal for education ; and their influence is only less than that of the teachers. I am, of course, well aware that in many Board Schools wonderful effects are wrought by high-minded teachers ; but broadly it is the case that a system which is subjected at short intervals—every third year—to the disturbance and, often, change of a popular election is unfavourable to the creation of sound traditions and a healthy atmosphere of education.

I have named the Clergy, because, as a matter of fact, they do at present mainly carry on the management of the schools ; but I do not doubt that there are many laymen of character and leisure who might be brought into the educational service of the nation as School Managers, if only they were set free from the distasteful and humiliating necessity of a popular election at frequent intervals.

In the next place, the Voluntary Schools, or rather, to speak more exactly, the denominational schools, embody the principle of religious education. I know well that great numbers of Christian people believe that the Board School system, as it now exists, is capable of providing such religious and moral education as satisfy the Christian conscience. Far be it from me to deny, or belittle, the excellent effects of efforts which have been made, notably in London, to make the most of the scanty liberty of religious teaching given by our present laws ; but, when all is said, there are hard facts which leap to the eyes of any impartial student of the Board School system. Religion has no "security of tenure" in the Board Schools ;

SERMON.

it may be banished altogether if the local majority so wills; in point of fact it has been so banished in the schools of some fifty School Boards. Religion has no guarantee of character, no measure of adequacy, no test of efficiency. It may not be expressed in creeds and catechisms, apart from which, none the less, any serious and systematic teaching is really impossible; it need not be entrusted to religious teachers; it must not be included in the general education, which His Majesty's Inspectors may examine and appraise. Religion, in fact, is tolerated within the schools, but forms no part of their educational system. I do not doubt that, even under such disadvantages, there are many Board Schools in which religious teachers make good use of the time set apart for religious instruction, and bring to bear on their children daily the salutary influence of the Christian character; but this precious element is not due to the system, nay, the system steadily tends to discourage it. I will not conceal from you my anxiety that the religious teacher is a vanishing type in our elementary schools. There are forces at work, which I may not now describe, which are affecting the teachers, notably the male teachers, especially in our Board Schools. They are becoming less religious and more professional. The system is working as might have been expected, and we are steadily moving towards secular education, pure and simple.

And yet, I believe, it is true (to borrow the words of the Royal Commissioners of 1888) that "all the evidence is practically unanimous as to the desire of the parents for the religious and moral training of their children"*; that "if the State were to secularize elementary education it would be in violation of the wishes of the parents, whose views in such a matter are entitled to the first consideration."†

Religious politicians, who are steadily urging the nation towards the goal of secular education, do commonly justify their policy by the assumption that religious and moral training

* *Vide* Report, p. 113.

† Report, p. 124.

SERMON.

will be provided elsewhere than in the schools. The home, the Church, the Sunday-school will do all that is necessary. Nonconformists for the most part take this view. They are religious men, valuing, no less than we, the religious basis for morality which Christianity gives, but they take sides against us on this question, because they are persuaded that the religious teaching we desire in the schools will be best provided elsewhere. Doubtless this will be so in many cases—in all cases where parents are serious Christian folk, who bring up their children in the fear of God; but I would affectionately urge Nonconformists to consider the case of those multitudes of children, derelict on the ocean of life, cursed from their cradles with drunken or vicious parents, hindered and polluted by the thousand circumstances of daily life, who must find whatsoever knowledge of God and duty which they shall have, in the schools to which the merciful severity of the law drives them. The number of such children is very large. In Birmingham alone it was testified before the Royal Commissioners of 1888 that “there were 26,000 whose names were on the roll “of some day school who attended no Sunday School.”* At the same ratio there must be more than a quarter of a million such children in London. In view of such considerations, will any thoughtful Christian acquiesce lightly in the total elimination of the religious principle from our elementary education? The failure of the Voluntary Schools will mean nothing less, and that failure is inevitable so long as the organized forces of Christianity in the country are at cross purposes on educational policy. The fate of the denominational schools is in the hands of the Protestant Nonconformists, and they (with one notable and honourable exception) stand at present in an attitude of implacable opposition. Is this necessarily a final attitude? I cannot believe it. I would venture to make affectionate appeal to the Nonconformists to consider whether their relentless hostility

* *Vide* Report, p. 121.

SERMON.

to the denominational schools is not really inconsistent with their own solemnly avowed principles. The Evangelical Free Church Catechism, issued two years ago, was drawn up by representative Congregationalists, Wesleyan Methodists, Baptists, Primitive Methodists, Presbyterians, members of the Methodist New Connexion, Bible Christians, and United Methodist Free Churchmen. It claims to represent "the beliefs of not less, " and probably many more, than sixty millions of avowed "Christians in all parts of the world." It consists of fifty-two questions and answers, and, after reading it over thoughtfully more than once, I cannot discover a single answer which seems to me properly inconsistent with the Church Catechism, or unacceptable to the mass of English Churchmen. If that Catechism were honestly taught in the State schools there would be no reason left for this weary struggle to maintain, as it were in opposition, a rival set of denominational schools. But be that as it may, I ask Nonconformists to consider the answers to questions 37 and 38 with reference to the present situation. Those questions and answers read thus:—

"37. Q. What is the duty of the Church to the State?

"A. To observe all the laws of the State unless contrary to the teaching of Christ; to make intercession for the people, and particularly for those in authority; to teach both rulers and subjects the eternal principles of righteousness, and to imbue the nation with the spirit of Christ."

We of the Church accept frankly every word of this statement; it embodies the view we take of our own duty; but we ask our Nonconformist brethren to consider how their doctrine can justify a policy which practically prohibits its application to the most spiritually necessitous section of the people.

"38. Q. What is the duty of the State to the Church?

"A. To protect all branches of the Church and their individual members in the enjoyment of liberty to worship God, and in efforts to promote the Religion of Christ, which do not interfere with the civil rights of others."

SERMON.

We find no fault with this doctrine; if it be open to criticism, it is rather as defective than as erroneous; but accepting it frankly, I appeal to Nonconformists to consider how their own doctrine of State duty is to justify a policy which involves the stultification and final extinction of the immense, and protracted, and self-sacrificing efforts to promote the Religion of Christ, which are represented by the creation and maintenance of the denominational schools. How are "the civil rights of others" interfered with by securing to Christian parents the right to have their children taught in the schools the faith which they themselves hold to be Divinely true and eternally precious? Who is injured in any article of his citizenship when the Church of Christ, in any or in all of its organized sections, is permitted to teach the poverty-stricken and morally derelict children of England the truth as it is in Jesus? In all honesty, is not the civil injury inflicted rather on the Christian parent compelled to accept for his children an education which he holds to be essentially defective; on the Christian Clergy, restrained in the exercise of their sacred and most salutary duties; most of all on the children of England, defrauded of the best, perhaps the only, protection they have against the moral perils of their life? I implore Nonconformists to believe that—whatever a handful of fanatics may write or say—we of the Church do earnestly desire to get into friendly relation with them on the question of the schools; we will not stand on denominational privileges; we are ready (as far as I can judge of our general feeling) to make great sacrifices of everything short of the principles at stake. I do not speak for myself only when I say that we desire the unification of the Educational System on the basis of reasonable compromise. The obstacle to the final settlement of the issues at stake will not be found in us.

"*Wisdom is justified by her works.*" We are able to trace through a whole century the fruits of that non-Christian system of education, to which, as things now stand, we in England

SERMON.

are surely drifting. I must not enter on this question, at the end of a sermon, but I cannot refrain from beseeching you to consider it.

We stand to-day at the beginning of a new session of Parliament. We have united once more in that familiar and solemn "Bidding Prayer," which carries so precious a freight of sacred and elevating associations to English folk. We pray for the Nation, ordered as a Christian State, and our prayer in this famous Church receives special significance from the presence here, by accustomed right, of those who directly represent in their own persons the solemn and anxious task of government. My Brothers, you will not resent it, if I remind you that of all the subjects which our Sovereign announced at the opening of Parliament for your consideration, this subject is by far the most important and far-reaching.

Wars are common incidents of the national life; and, though they inflict heavy burdens and exact terrible sacrifices, they pass and leave the people wiser and stronger for their coming; but the issues of an educational policy are of another kind. In no merely rhetorical sense, we English folk stand at the parting of the ways, and the choice of our road lies with you. We have the opportunity now of creating one National System, which shall absorb the denominational schools without injustice, by frankly accepting the principle which those schools represent; we can now, if we will, remove from the body politic a civic hardship, which, for a whole generation, has oppressed and exasperated great numbers of good citizens; we can now, if we will, make an end of a continuous and long-standing quarrel between Churchmen and Nonconformists, and thus at last make possible their frank co-operation in the holy and necessary work of bringing the faith and morals of the Gospel into the national life. I pray God that the supreme interest of the National Education may no longer be sacrificed to the miserable fanaticisms of political partisanship, and the still more disgraceful jealousies of religious sectarianism.







