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ON READING THE PRAYERS AND  
LESSONS.

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A SERMON

PREACHED

*At an Ordination held in Norwich Cathedral,*

ON

TRINITY SUNDAY (JUNE 4),

1882,

BY

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(DEAN OF NORWICH.)

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# SERMON.

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1 COR. xiv., 15.

*“I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray  
with the understanding also.”*

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Among the numerous topics which suggest themselves in connexion with an occasion like the present, I choose one, which, if not quite in the foremost rank (an admission, however, which I make somewhat reluctantly), has yet, I am persuaded, far greater importance than is generally ascribed to it. The public functions of the clergy, those which they exercise in the congregation, are twofold. That which has the most obvious and direct bearing upon the interests of the people is the function of preaching, in which they appear as God's ambassadors, charged with a message gathered out of His living oracles, which they are to deliver with all earnestness and fidelity. But there is another side of our ministrations which, because it seems to be so much easier, and to demand so much less forethought and preparation, is sadly apt to be neglected, to the great detriment of our congregations, and to the lowering of the whole tone of our public worship. If it be a high honour and trust to be God's mouth-piece to the people in the sermon, it is scarcely a lower honour, or a less responsible trust, to be their mouth-piece to Him in conducting their devotions, and saying the Church's appointed Prayers. “Oh; but anyone can read the Prayers!” Can they? It is just this notion,—that any person, educated to the extent a clergyman must necessarily have been, can offer the prescribed prayers in such a way as to kindle and help the devotions of the people, and thus to edify them,—that makes the Service so often a dead



letter, and even creates in certain congregations, where the indifference to it is patent, an undefinable impression of the most offensive kind, that nothing transacted in Church is of any interest or importance, until the sermon comes. How deeply dishonouring to God, and how discreditable to those who are charged, not only to preach His Word, but also to administer His ordinances, is such an impression, wherever it prevails!

It may be of use, then, if on the present occasion I lay down some of the principles (time will not serve to do more) which must underlie our reading of the public prayers, if that reading is to tell upon our people for good, and to be an element, as surely it ought to be, in their spiritual training. And although the Lessons, and appointed portions of Scripture, are more or less addressed to the people, and in this view of them would seem to fall under a different category from the Prayers, I shall embrace them in my remarks. For indeed there is a point of view in which the ritual reading of Holy Scripture in the congregation forms part of the service offered to God, which indeed may be said of everything transacted in the Church, preaching not excepted. The ceremonial Law of old had a provision analogous to the Lessons: "In your solemn days," it is said, "ye shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; that they may be to you *for a memorial before your God.*"\* The ritual reading of the appointed Scriptures, in the Christian Church, intermingled as it is with the prayers of the people, is the blowing of the trumpet over the sacrifices for a memorial before God; and in the Pre-Reformation Church this significance of the Lessons used to be indicated by the practice of burning incense during the reading of the Gospel.

I. Now the first principle, which underlies all good reading of the Church Service, is that announced in the first clause of my text; "I will pray with the spirit,"—the higher element of my nature, that in virtue of which I am capable of holding communion with God, shall be called into exercise in my prayer. "God is a spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth," Indeed unless the spirit is called into active exercise, and does its part, while there may still be a form of

\* Numbers x. 10.





prayer, and a form (as all our liturgical forms are) edifying, beautiful, logically symmetrical, and echoing with Holy Scripture at every turn, there can be nothing which deserves the name of worship or prayer. The prayers of saints are said to be "golden vials full of odours." \* The golden vial is ready to our hand in the Prayer Book,—it rests with us to fill it with the odours of holy aspirations and affections,—the odours of spiritual incense kindled upon the heart's altar by the power of the Holy Ghost,—as it is written, "Let my prayer be set forth in Thy sight as the incense." † This, then, is the fundamental, the indispensable, condition of all good officiating, of all such reading of the service I mean, as shall be helpful and edifying to the people. The minister must be really praying himself, holding real communion with God in his own soul,—a circumstance which in the long run is sure to make itself felt,—if the people are to be lured on to join in the same holy exercise. "The disciple is not above the master: it is enough for the disciple if he be as his master;" and, if you, God's duly qualified ambassador, are not engaged in secret communion with Him, when you read the prayers and lessons, you cannot expect to lift up the souls of your flock—(however anxious some of them may be to shake off the influence of the work and worries of the week)—into a higher and purer atmosphere, which you are not breathing yourself. The first thing is, then, to realise your position as standing face to face with God and Jesus Christ, and then to pour out your own heart unto Them in the appointed form of confession, supplication, or thanksgiving, as the case may be. Your doing this habitually will act as a spell upon the congregation, you may be sure, without the smallest effort on your part to impress them. No need to "preach the prayers," or try to make them effective by your rendering of them (a most offensive practice indeed); all will feel that you are praying; and the desire will be kindled in them to pray too.

And the same with the Lessons. Realise your position. You are for the time God's mouth-piece, much more entirely and absolutely than you can be in a sermon, where the fallibility of the minister is apt in greater or less degree to deprave the ministration. With what reverence, with what

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\* See Rev. v. 8.

† Ps. cxli. 2.

desire to bring out the full significance of the sacred text, should you read! And, again, you are blowing the two silver trumpets on the solemn day over the burnt offering,—making the memorial before God of His Word in both its sections, the Old and New Testament,—with all the “exceeding great and precious promises,” which it holds out, and which are the foundation of our hopes. The blowing of these two trumpets is to “be an ordinance for ever throughout all generations” of the Church militant. How careful should we be, in sounding them, to make the significance of them apparent, so that “the trumpet may not give an uncertain sound,”—to impress upon the minds of the hearers what God would have impressed by that particular Lesson!

II. So much for the first and most important counsel which has to be given in the matter we are now considering. But is it the only counsel, or the only one of any moment? So long as we are heedful, while conducting the worship of the congregation, to maintain in our own hearts the spirit of prayer and of communion with God, is that all we need care for? May all the more mechanical parts of the great function—tone, delivery, pronunciation, emphasis, slowness or speed in reciting,—be safely left to take their chance? I reply deliberately and very emphatically, No. Upon principle, No. Prayer has a body as well as a spirit; and the body, as well as the spirit, is to be cared for. Of its spirit, and the absolute necessity of maintaining it in our conduct of Public Worship, we have already spoken. The body is the outward expression, which conveys the desire of the heart. And as the prayer in both its parts is an offering to God, this expression must be the best, the choicest, the most appropriate that is within our reach. Not only must the incense give out its fragrance, but the vial from which it is poured upon the incense-altar must be golden,—“*golden vials full of odours.*” Now how is this to be? The first and most important advice for rectifying the expression of the prayer,—I mean, its expression by the living voice,—is that he who recites or offers it should thoroughly understand it;—“I will pray with the understanding also.” “But everyone understands the Prayers.” Do they? I have a very strong conviction, the result of having been led for some

years to study various parts of the Prayer Book, that nobody understands it who has not studied it (in its history and gradual construction, as well as its phraseology), and that even those of us who understand it best have still much to learn in it, many hidden and edifying meanings to elicit and discover. At all events, this may be said, without hesitation or fear of contradiction, respecting the volume of Holy Scripture, the reading of which in the ears of the congregation is, as I have already intimated, one of the most important parts of Public Worship. Whatever proficiency a man may have made in the study of God's Word, there still remain mines of significance in it which have yet to be explored; and each of us, therefore, may humbly hope that as he gains, in the course of his daily reading and meditation, fresh light upon the meaning of Holy Scripture, he shall be better qualified some years hence, than he is now, to be a public reader of it. But the Prayers, so far as they vary from the language of Holy Scripture (and how little they do vary!), together with the whole structure of the Services, certainly stand upon a different footing from the Holy Scriptures, as not having been given by inspiration of God; and yet to one who looks into the Book of Common Prayer, with the desire to acquaint himself with its full significance, how entirely will it approve itself not only as a composition on which a wonderful amount of learning and thought has been expended, but which has been watched over at every stage of its construction by the special Providence of God! But it is vain to expect that you can exhibit the significance of these Services, unless you have yourselves seized it; and to seize it without study is an impossibility.—An instance drawn from my own early experience will best illustrate what I mean; I trust you will pardon my egotism, if egotism it be, in adducing it. Shortly after I had been ordained Priest, an elderly friend, who casually heard me give the Absolution on one of the first occasions on which I was qualified to give it, told me it was evident to him, from my manner of reading, that I did not understand it. I was inclined to be piqued by the censure at first, until he showed me that it was perfectly just. "You do not perceive the coherence of the formulary," said he; "you have never laid the parts of it together in your mind. The earlier part contains an announce-

ment of the terms on which God forgives the sinner, which are repentance and faith; 'He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel.' What follows is a prayer, or an exhortation to prayer, that we, the congregation there present, may come under the terms so announced, which can only be by God's grace forming in us these dispositions of heart; 'Wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance, and his holy Spirit' (i.e., the holy Spirit of faith,) so that, our persons being accepted through Christ, the worship we now offer may be accepted,— 'that those things may please him, which we do at this present; and that' henceforth we may date our course afresh from this new exercise of repentance and faith—'the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy; so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy.'" "No man," my friend added, "whose mind is fully possessed with this connexion of thought, can fail to indicate it in his voice by laying a slight emphasis on the 'us;' 'Wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance and his holy Spirit.' You did not do this; and I saw at once that you had never given any thought or study to the formulary; your voice would have gone right enough, had not your understanding been in fault." It was a great lesson to me at starting, which I have never forgotten, how very little one may understand of formularies familiar to us as household words, thinking that, because the sound of them is in our ears, the sense is, therefore, necessarily in our minds.—I may add that the late Bishop Wilberforce (who was blessed with a voice of marvellous flexibility of tone) set me a thinking, when I first heard him confirm children, what could be his meaning in giving a stress and tone to the word "everlasting" in the close of the sentence of Administration;—"Defend, O Lord, this Thy child, &c., &c., that he may continue Thine for ever, and daily increase in Thy holy Spirit more and more, till he come [to Thine *everlasting* kingdom." It struck me that the implication of such an emphasis must be that the child had *already* come, in virtue of its Baptism, into God's earthly kingdom, the Church, and that what now remained was, that by the defence of His grace, and by daily increase in the holy Spirit, it might reach the *everlasting*



kingdom,—might “finally come to the land of everlasting life,” as the phraseology is in the Baptismal Service. So I asked the Bishop whether that was what he intended to convey. “Well,” he said, “I do not know that I ever intended to convey anything; but certainly that is how I understand the words; and I suppose I say them accordingly.” This is a good instance of a meaning latent in words, being elicited and conveyed to the hearer by the method of reading them.

But while the understanding of a formulary is the *first* requisite for the right rendering of it by the voice, it is not the sole one. There are other points, *minutiæ* seemingly,—but still *minutiæ* which, if not attended to, are apt to distress the congregation, and hinder their devotions,—in which almost all readers require correction, and in which the correction must be made before a faulty habit is formed. Such are vulgar, broad, mincing, and provincial pronunciations of certain words; drawling (a most pernicious habit, because it balks the worshipper, and takes the fervour out of his devotions); an unduly rapid recital of the prayers in a country congregation, where the comparatively uneducated minds of the peasants cannot possibly move so fast as that of the clergyman; whining and snuffling, as the Puritans used to do, as if forsooth, because the exercise is a religious one, the voice ought to lose all its natural tones, and assume an artificial and querulous key. Add to which, that all of us (but more especially those who have any force of character or originality of mind) have certain mannerisms in pronunciation, gesture, attitude, the result of idiosyncrasy or our peculiar temperament,—some of which perhaps may be harmless (and to those who know and love us even interesting, as part of our personality), but others are apt to be grotesque, ungraceful, painfully eccentric, and such as we should do well to unlearn. How are we to proceed in regard to these and similar defects, which may prove a real drawback and hindrance in our ministration of God’s ordinances? It would be well if every young clergyman would select some judicious senior friend, a scholar and a gentleman as well as a Christian, and a man of experience and knowledge of the world, and would invite him to be a listener, and make what criticisms he pleased both on the reading and preaching of a

beginner. "My only wish is to cure the faults incidental to my youth and inexperience; tell me candidly what they are. Notice them all, small and great, if you please, all the mis-pronounced words, all the vulgarisms, all the provincialisms, all the affectations, all the pieces of bad taste, all the oddities, all the uncouthnesses, everything in my manner, voice, or bearing, which could by possibility distress my hearers, or excite a smile on their countenances." Such a Mentor might do incalculable service, if we only gave him full liberty of speech, with the assurance that we should never take offence whatever his criticisms might be. But pray observe that, if any such advice is to be effectual to the cure of bad habits, it must be given and taken at the *beginning* of our ministerial career. The fault, which a little attention and care will serve to eradicate at twenty-four, is stereotyped upon us and has become part of our personality at forty-four.—But I seem to hear some of my hearers saying, "Are you not going too much into *minutiæ*? Are such trivialities as tone, manner, pronunciation, worthy of being considered in a sacred function, the execution of which touches the highest interest of men?" Most assuredly. The worship of God, in its very humblest part, should be conducted with all the dignity, reverence, and scrupulous care, which we can possibly throw into it. Shall I say we are never quite right, until a spirit of scrupulosity (or, if you prefer that word, *punctiliousness*) pervades and gives a certain tone to our ministrations? And punctiliousness stands in small things; and "he that contemneth small things shall fall by little and little."\* The saying of Mr. Romaine, which is often quoted, has an admirable moral,—all the more admirable, because it turns upon a very insignificant matter—a piece of clerical costume, which is now (for whatever reasons) falling fast into desuetude. Observing his curate coming out of the vestry without bands, Mr. Romaine said to him, "How now, sir? no bands?" "I thought, sir, they did not signify," was the reply. "Not signify, sir? How may not the course end, which begins so? First, no bands; then no surplice; then no Prayer-book; and then no Bible, sir." If by giving up the Bible be meant giving up belief

\* Ecclus. xiv. I.



in its inspiration, and in the supernatural character of much which it records, many even of our clergy, its professed and authorised exponents, (alas! that I should have to say so!) are unhappily fast giving up the Bible. I do not say, because obviously the two things have no sort of connexion, that this comes in any way from having first given up the bands; but in connexion with Mr. Romaine's observation, which has become more or less historical, it is a grim and grotesque fact that the two surrenders appear together on the same page of Church of England history; and any how the principle stands unimpeached, and needs no fanciful or far-fetched connexion to establish it, that minute infidelities in the service and worship of God lead on to serious ones.

Presume not, then, in any part of the ministry you are now about to undertake, to "contemn small things." You are to labour to make everything connected with Divine Worship as solemn, as reverent, as edifying to man, as acceptable to God, as you have it in you to make it. And as a test to your own consciences, whether or not you are doing this with the pure intention of honouring our Divine Master, and discharging in a manner pleasing to Him the great function of conducting Public Worship, let me propose to you in conclusion this question,—whether even at times when your congregation is very small, insignificant alike in numbers and station (say on Wednesdays and Fridays, for example, when there is no sermon, and no singing, and nobody comes to church but two or three old folks from the alms-house), you observe the ritual of your Church with the same punctiliousness, say the Prayers with the same fervour and devotion, and read the Lessons with the same reverence, and the same desire to bring out their meaning for those who do attend, as you would if you were officiating in the dome area of St. Paul's on Sunday evening, when that vast space is crowded with upturned faces? How far, in short, is your carefulness in conducting Divine Worship a piece of eye-service, rendered by men-pleasers,—or how far (on the other hand) is it done in singleness of heart with reverence and godly fear? Is not the presence of Him "who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks," covenanted equally to the two or three alms-people in the country

church, as to the multitude assembled in the dome-area? "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."\* Let His presence be but the ruling thought in our minds, whenever we presume to administer His ordinances; and while even then we shall have to throw ourselves upon His mercy for the pardon of many negligences and ignorances, yet the service, being rendered "in singleness of heart, as to the Lord and not unto men," will not fail through His intercession to be accepted, nor will the people fail in the long run to be edified, discovering by instinct, as even the least educated among them will do very rapidly, the devotion which animates their pastor's heart, and which will spread among them, in proportion to their capacity of receiving it, the sacred infection of Prayer and Praise.

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\* St. Matt. xviii, 20.

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society is become corrupt; the light that is in it is become darkness; the leaven that leavens it is not the Divine leaven of the Gospel, but that of worldliness, selfishness, sensuality, and wickedness; therefore all these miseries—the necessary fruits of sin—come upon it. The Gospel is called the light of the world, the salt that is to keep it from corruption, the leaven that is to leaven all man's life, and how awfully does history and the course of the Divine judgements show that it is so indeed; for if in any nation that light is put "under a bushel," or is not set on a sufficient 'candlestick' so that all who come in may see it, then more and more do we see darkness of every kind covering it. And "if the light that is in it be darkness," if what pretends to be Christianity is, for the most part, some frightful perversion of it, "how dark is that darkness!" And if any "body" or society of men is not leavened with that salt, how visibly does it decay and become utterly corrupt. "If the salt have lost its savour"—if the teachers and leaders of public opinion in any nation have become worldly—"wherewith shall it be salted?" "It is thenceforth good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men." He must be blind who does not, by this time, perceive how entirely it is one principle, and one only which "has the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come"—namely, real and true Christian faith—one GOD, one only who in the end rules this as well as all other worlds—namely, GOD manifest in CHRIST. Where that faith is not, everything sooner or later decays—"it carries within itself the germs of its own dissolution." All spiritual food is useless or poisonous that is not leavened with this; all light is darkness that is not borrowed from and illumined with this. If we would make our education worth anything at all—if we would have teachers who shall do any good and not wide-spreading harm—if we would teach politics in any way that shall not be poisonous—all must be leavened with this leaven of real uncorrupted Christianity. It is not necessary only, or chiefly, that the teachers should be men who profess Christianity as their declared creed, nor yet that the doctrines of the Bible should be taught at times, but the main point is, that true uncorrupted Christianity should be the leaven, leavening the whole character of the teacher, and giving its savour to the whole doctrine taught about everything. This is the sole and only true remedy for all our ills: "this *is* now—just as much as shall be hereafter—"life eternal to know Thee the only true GOD and JESUS CHRIST whom Thou hast sent." Leaven a nation with this faith and it will come soon to "glory, honour, and immortality;" take away this, or turn the faith which ought to be "leaven, leavening the whole lump"—leavening all politics, philosophy, and wisdom into a dead stone separate from all life—and in the end it will come to sure destruction and shame—to "indignation and wrath, tribulation, and anguish." If men will not believe this by *faith* in GOD's word, they will be compelled sooner or later to acknowledge it by the *sight* of GOD's judgements.













