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18
OUR UNITY AND BROTHERHOOD IN GOD:

A S E R M O N

PREACHED IN HAGLEY CHURCH,

ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 1863,

AFTER THE CELEBRATION OF THE COMING OF AGE OF THE

HON. C. G. LYTTELTON.

BY THE

HON. AND REV. W. H. LYTTELTON,

RECTOR.

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limited in its effects to this world, or to Time. May HE grant that we may never have cause to remember any of the high hopes which we all with good reason I think entertained, on those days, with any feelings but those of joy and of thankfulness, either in this world or in that great Eternity that shall be, when this world, and the things of this world, shall have passed away for ever!

I should be sorry that any reader should suppose that the two members of the congregation to whom personal allusion is made in the Sermon were present when it was delivered. They happened both of them to be absent ; which enabled me to speak as I did.

W. H. L.

S E R M O N .

“Behold, how good and joyful a thing it is : brethren, to dwell together in unity !

“It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down unto the beard : even unto Aaron’s beard, and went down to the skirts of his clothing.

“Like as the dew of Hermon : which fell upon the hill of Sion.

“For there the Lord promised his blessing : and life for evermore.”—PSALM CXXXIII.

THESE ancient and sacred words, my brethren, which are so familiar to us all, may be applied, as I hope to show you before the end of my sermon, to our own use under present circumstances.

But, before I show this, I will endeavour to explain their original sense.

They come to us like the rest of that most beautiful book the Book of Psalms, from a far distant country of the earth and from very

ancient times. And yet how wonderfully they fit our case and are suited for our use now! We all, I think, must often feel this as we use the Book of Psalms. Its words come wonderfully home to our hearts. This makes us feel the real brotherhood, the family relationship, as we may call it, of all mankind in every place and every age. Yes, my brethren, the *deepest* joys and sorrows, the deepest hopes and fears of us all are in many things very much alike. And it is for that reason that these wonderful Psalms, written by King David, the sweet Psalmist of Israel, or by Moses in the wilderness, or by the Prophets Daniel and Ezekiel in the land of their captivity, or by Ezra the Scribe, fit us now in this far-distant age; and we find we can pour out our feelings before God in the very same words in which they did long ages ago. This is like that singular fact told us by musicians, that if a note is played on an instrument of music in a room in which are other stringed instruments, these latter will answer to the note played—the strings of one answering, faintly it may be, yet really, to the strings in another. Even so in those most wonderful of all musical instruments of

Almighty God's making—the Souls of men, one will answer to another, however far separated by the great spaces of the world and of time. Yes, my brethren, *our* souls are set thinking and feeling by the great words of ancient prophets and inspired writers in the old world thousands of years ago. So, indeed, “*deep calleth unto deep,*” the deep of one man's soul to the deep of another man's, and there is “*a noise as of water-pipes,*” a *circulation* of feeling and of thought in the great heart of humanity.

Now, my brethren, before I go on to explain the beautiful Psalm which I have taken for my text, I must mention a few facts about when, and by whom, it is supposed to have been written.

If you look at the Bible version of the Psalms, you will find that the Psalms from the 120th to the 134th are entitled “songs of degrees.” Some learned men tell us that the words of the original should be translated “songs of steps,” or “songs of goings up.” Now there have been great discussions among Hebrew scholars as to what these words properly mean. Some have supposed, as I have mentioned to you in

former times, that these Psalms were written in the time of David and of the Kings, for the use of the Israelites on their pilgrimages, or journeys up to Jerusalem from all parts of the country, to keep their great religious feasts; and hence they have called them "pilgrim-songs." And I have, before now, endeavoured to show you how beautifully some of them were fitted for use at such times. But, on the other hand, some of the rest do not seem quite to fit this idea of their origin. We need not however go now at any length into these questions. I will content myself* with telling you that there is one other theory as to their origin, which on the whole seems more probably true:—and that is, that they were written in the days of Nehemiah, at the time of the return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity, and were used by them while at their work in re-building the walls of Jerusalem; and

* This is very well stated, and many of the illustrations I have given in the sermon are suggested in "An Introduction to the study and use of the Psalms," by the Rev. J. F. Thrupp, in two volumes, published by Macmillan, and to be had of any bookseller—a most valuable and complete book upon its subject.

were called "songs of goings-up," because they were used by the workmen as they *went up* to their work on the walls.

If you will look through these Psalms in this view, you will see in how many ways they express feelings which would have been natural under such circumstances. The Israelites must have had a very deep feeling at that time of their great need of Divine help, and of the gracious protection of their Heavenly Lord and God. For they were surrounded by bitter and cunning enemies;—they were "*constrained to dwell with Mesek, and to have their habitation among the tents of Kedar.*" They passed their lives among wicked men who were "*enemies unto peace,*" who, "*when they spake unto them thereof, made them ready to battle.*" There were many Samaritans among them, half heathens, not like the true Israelites, "*good and true of heart,*" but double-minded, wishing to be partly Israelites and partly like the Babylonians, or other heathens—serving God a little and Mammon a little. Accordingly there were many "*snares of the fowler,*" as they say—traps laid to catch them; and many "*false brethren*" who "*turned back unto*

their own wickedness,” men of *“lying lips and a deceitful tongue”*—not of the true *“Israel of God.”* So they carried on their work amongst manifold dangers by day and by night, from before the dawn of day, *“even before the morning watch,”* till the stars shone out once more in the mighty vault overhead. But in all their labour, their toil, and their danger, they looked to God in His gracious mercy, and ever watchful Providence, to protect them. Without HIM, how could they be safe?—*“Except THE LORD built the house their labour would be lost that built it; except THE LORD kept the city, the watchman would wake but in vain.”* But they were sure that He would keep them. Every common sight became to them a witness of His actual presence with them. They looked at the hills, whose dark outline stood out so clear against the sky by day and night *“round about Jerusalem,”* and they recognized in them solid types and symbols of the sure guardianship of God over His people. They looked at the City built as *“at unity in itself,”* and it was to them a type of that deeper unity which ought to subsist among the members of God’s Church and Family.

So “*out of the deep*” of misery and fear which at time oppressed them, they could still “*call unto the Lord,*” and know that He would “*hear their voice.*” “*Many a time had their enemies fought against them*” in times past; but always “*the righteous Lord had hewn the snares of the ungodly in pieces;*” and so they were sure He would again. Their cause, they knew was indeed the cause of God, which *He* would defend. And so “*the sun should not burn them by day, neither the moon by night; yea, it was even He that should keep their souls.*” By night as by day, in the darkness as in the light, they would be safe, because “*He that kept Israel should neither slumber nor sleep,*” and because “*their help came even from the Lord who made Heaven and Earth.*” And though they might indeed now be “*sowing in tears,*” yet should they, without fail, one day “*reap in joy.*” Their great happiness that had come upon them “*when the Lord turned again the captivity of Sion,*” —when their joy and surprise had been so great, that they had been “*like unto them that dream,*” and “*their mouth had been filled with laughter and their tongue with joy,*” and when they “*said of them among the heathen, that the Lord had done great things for them,*” —this joy

should surely be fulfilled and continued, and “*he that now went on his way weeping, but bearing forth good seed, should doubtless come again with joy and bring his sheaves with him.*” And as they returned each to his own home from their perilous and toilsome labours, and thought of the better times that should come in the future, it must have delighted them to sing, in the words of the 128th Psalm, of God’s promised blessing upon their wives and children; and of how these latter, their children and grandchildren, should at last see the long-wished-for “*peace upon Israel.*”

Read these beautiful and devout “songs of degrees,” bearing these circumstances in mind, and you will find them full of meaning; and if you do so with a devout and teachable mind, you can adapt them to your own use,—make them profitable to your own soul in stirring your heart to a livelier trust in God’s gracious promises to yourself, and to His whole Church now.

The words of that particular Psalm which I have taken for my text, the 133rd, are such as would very naturally have been suggested under such circumstances. Never, probably, do men feel the bond of brotherhood with one

another so strongly as when they are under some danger that is common to them all; when a little company of fellow-countrymen and brethren are labouring together, as the Jews were then, in the midst of fierce and cunning enemies; more especially if, in addition to this, every one of that little company is engaged in labouring at some great undertaking interesting to all their hearts, as the Israelites were in re-building the walls of their ancient and sacred city, in the Name of the Lord, and to His glory.

Then indeed we may understand how deeply they might feel how "*good and joyful it was to dwell together in unity*"—how the pleasure and joy of that feeling of brotherhood sweetened all life in every part of it—how that feeling filled even the most trifling acts with a delightful fragrance, even as the holy oil that was poured upon the head of Aaron, went down "*even to the very skirts of his clothing*"; and it was as "*the dew which fell upon the hill of Hermon,*" or as that other (—so probably the words should be translated) "*which fell upon the*" more sacred "*hill of Sion, for there,*" on Sion, "*the Lord promised His blessing, and life for evermore*"—the dews which

fell *there* might be regarded as the result of the Everlasting Covenant, and were therefore typical of greater blessings than those which are limited by time, even of those which belong to the everlasting Kingdom of God—the “*life for evermore.*”

Now, my brethren, I trust that there must be many of you who will feel that there is an appropriateness in the words of this very beautiful ancient Psalm for our use at this particular time.

We indeed are far more favourably circumstanced in every respect than were those Israelites in the days of Nehemiah. *We*, by the infinite blessing and kindness of God our Saviour to us, have no bitter enemies round about us to attack and disturb our peace. *We* have not to “ *dwell with Mesek,*” or “ *have our habitation among the tents of Kedar.*” No, my brethren, was there ever a community in this fallen and suffering world who dwelt in securer peace than we do?—verily “ *each man under his vine, and under his fig-tree,*”—“ *in pastures fair, near pleasant streams,*”—in the peace and quiet of happy English homes. Neither is there, to most of *us* at least, as we look back over past years,

and upon all the way which “*the Lord our God hath led us these many years*” through the long pilgrimage of human life to this day, any “*time of captivity*” of which we can recal the sad memories as the Israelites could, when we had to suffer any cruel wrongs from enemies of our race and of our faith, or when “*by the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept*” in the bitterness of our souls ; and when, had they asked for one of the songs of our native land, we could only have answered—“*How shall we sing the Lord’s Song in a strange land ?*”

No, my brethren, different indeed has been our lot. We were nursed in christian homes ; never do we remember the time when the church bell did not call us, at least on Lord’s-days, to prayer ; we have never known the terrors of war—the very words which signify these things are almost unmeaning to us ; they come to us as out of some far distance ; they sound to us like the far murmurings of a storm to men securely sheltered in homes of peace and in havens of safety.

And some of us who delight to gather together, day by day, in this beautiful and peaceful sanctuary

of God, love to do so partly out of thankfulness to the Great and Bountiful Giver of all our peace and all our blessings. And because, day by day, those blessings are showered so plentifully upon us, therefore day by day we would acknowledge them to Him in His own house, and offer in His sanctuary a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Yes, my brethren, surely in our more thoughtful moments, it is almost awful to think of the greatness of our blessings—of the unnumbered trials and difficulties which we might have had to undergo, but which are known only by name, if even so, to us.

So that that particular help to the feeling of brotherhood which was given to the Israelites in the days of Nehemiah, and which came from a common sense of danger, or from union with one another in resisting human foes, is altogether strange to us. But we may nevertheless enter for other reasons into many of the feelings expressed in this beautiful Psalm. Intense joy and happiness may sometimes draw us together almost as deeply as sorrow and danger; and even the shallower and commoner kinds of joy, if shared by multitudes, have something of the same

effect. And has not God, my brethren, by late events, and by His blessing upon all that took place, purposed in this way, we may humbly think, to make us feel more at unity one with another, in this our happy and favoured parish, than we did before? Can any one have gone through these last two weeks with a mind and heart at all open to right impressions, without having felt thereby drawn more near to all his brethren and companions, his friends and neighbours, with whom he is passing through life? Does not God at such times indeed reveal to us in wonderful ways, our *unity one with another?* and that, not only with the members of any one class to which we may happen ourselves to belong but with all our brethren? Are we not all sharers in *one feeling?* Are we not all in a deep and real way, then, of *one mind?* Yes, my brethren, and when to the common feeling of every-day joy, such as we may have at any common festival, which itself is some help to unity, there is added any deeper ground of sympathy,—when not only the shallower feelings of our common human heart are stirred, but some also of its stronger and more deep-seated

chords are at the same time struck, when some common memory, sacred to the minds of all, is called up out of its deep hiding place within, and becomes in very deed present with power to every musing soul—and many an eye becomes dimmed with tears, and many a face grows pale, and many a strong form is shaken with the deeper emotions of the soul; then indeed we feel in another and far more mysterious way *one with one another*: our highest hopes and deepest thoughts are felt to be the same for all of us; we are one in God, for only in Him have we hope. May it, my brethren, have been indeed so with many of us during the last two weeks' festivities! May the feelings which have been stirred in us not have been altogether shallow: may they have drawn us to feel our inward brotherhood even amid all external differences, and brought us nearer to God, and in Him to each other! And then, if so, my brethren, I trust that that feeling will not end in itself, but that just as those ancient Israelites, of whom we have been thinking, were drawn together not only by the feeling of their dangers, but also by the common work in which they were engaged, so we too

may in our time and measure, and so long as God gives us life in this present world, be moved to go forth to "*build the walls of the City of God,*" to do some real work for God and for His Church: to show our thankfulness for His endless and untold blessings to us, by some true and persevering work for the souls for which He died. O hear that voice—that Divine voice—addressing each one of you in your own individual soul from Heaven, as by name: "*Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?*"—then, "*Feed My sheep, feed My lambs:*"—care for those for whom I poured out My Blood upon the Cross,—try to do some real work with Me and for Me for your suffering and perishing fellow-creatures, who are indeed My Sheep and My Lambs. Yes, my brethren, and if you do this in the spirit of real faith in God, then will you be led to some greater thoughts than relate only to this present world. We may not be able to tell what exactly the ancient Psalmist meant, when he was led to those great and strange words with which he concludes his Psalm. We cannot tell how far he had a distinct vision of a future state and future life, when he spoke of "*the Lord promising*

His blessing, AND LIFE FOR EVERMORE.” But so much as this I think we may see:—that all moments of intense feeling do seem to lift us up for the time out of this narrow world and state,—do make us *feel* that man has a higher life and higher calling than merely to live a few years on this earth, and then die. Yes, those strong affections that last after death, and in defiance of death, those deep yearnings of the soul that make us feel that the dead are still ours, and we theirs,—those common feelings which so shake, to its deep foundations the whole heart of great multitudes of human beings at one time, and knock, as it were, in their intensity, loud at the very door of Heaven, asking for admission There,—those sorrows that almost make us one with Him Who wept at the grave of Lazarus, but Who at last Himself rose triumphant over death,—these do bring home to our very souls the *sense* of our greatness and of our immortality. We not only know but *feel*, that God is near us; and as through a crack in the prison walls of this material world, we seem to ourselves to see for the moment into the higher Life that shall be—yea, that is at this

moment around us and about us, in the great world of Spirits.

And so, my brethren, if in these weeks you have looked upon the face of one for whom you have shown you care, and have seen it trembling with the thought of a great sorrow; and if you have looked also upon another face, still in the glory of its youth, looking forward in hope to future times, and to life on earth—O, then, do not limit your thoughts or your prayers and hopes for them to this world,—do not believe that that past for *him* is altogether past,—do not think that the future for that other is bounded by this narrow world, and narrow life: no! but—let the wings of your soul expand,—let your thoughts widen boldly,—let them rise even to the very THRONE OF GOD, and to Him that sitteth thereon, and Who created us to live with HIM for ever. Pray that these two, and all of us, may indeed through Christ's infinite mercies be fitted to dwell with Him, and to take our place among the redeemed "SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE LORD ALMIGHTY,"* in that Great and Glorious Kingdom of the Future, in which the "sons of

* II Cor. vi. 17, 18.

God" shall be "manifested."* Believe the great words that tell that in Him Who has once for all conquered death, we *may* be one with each other, not only in Time, but also in the great Eternity that shall be; and that it is indeed the sober truth that to "Sion,"—to His true Church,—to all that are truly His,—"*the Lord hath promised His blessing, and LIFE FOR EVER-MORE.*"

* See Rom. viii. 19.









