

The Life of Departed Souls."



A SERMON
PREACHED FOR THE GUILD OF ALL SOULS,
AT THE
CHURCH OF S. BARNABAS, PIMLICO,
BY THE
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"ALL LIVE UNTO HIM."

S. Luke xx. 38.

These, you will remember, are the words of our Blessed Lord, in His well-known dialogue with the Sadducees concerning the state of the Departed. And they bear very closely upon the special purpose of our commemoration to day. They translate us at once into the sphere of the unseen world. They tell of its energetic life. They call up before us not so much the *memories* of the saintly dead, who have passed away, as rather their living forms and their *present activities* in a higher order of being.

Thus it is a wondrous circle of vision which is here opened out to us. Reaching back to the Patriarchs of the old Dispensation, "of whom Moses spoke at the Bush"; embracing, in yet closer union with the Lord of Life, the Apostles and Martyrs of the New; gathering,

within its ever-widening circumference, the [3/4] souls of the faithful as they have passed--age after age--from this invisible scene: "a great multitude which no man can number;" it represents *all* at this present as in a state of active, conscious life. "God is not the God of the dead but of the living: for all live unto Him." In this passage, then, our Lord declares primarily, the conscious fellowship of the departed soul with God. His words imply further a *quicken'd life* "in things pertaining to God." For "*all live unto Him.*" In that more spiritual sphere the clogs and hindrances of the material are removed, and life--the true life of the spirit--assumes, so to speak, a more Godward direction. It lives to God and in God: closer to the Source of Life; with a freer reciprocity of spiritual fellowship; more unhindered in its heavenward aspirations; more perfect in all the aspects and relations of the Divine Life! Suffer me then to direct your attention for a while this morning to these deeply instructive words of our Lord.

I. And first, their Sadduceeistic reference is not without an important bearing upon our own times. "The Sadducees say that there is no Resurrection, neither Angel nor Spirit." That sect represented the sceptical temper of the age, which denied the reality [4/5] of all truth that lay beyond the boundaries of human knowledge. Consequently, there was no place in its Creed either for the future Resurrection of the dead, or for the continued existence of the soul, in a real--though invisible--world, peopled with the forms of angelic life and with human spirits. Can we say that this unbelieving temper has died out? that it has not lingered on even in the precincts of the Christian Church? that even the 19th century, with all its progress and illumination, is free from those antiquated errors, which our Lord exposed in his arguments with the Sadducees--the Agnostics of His day? To deny, or to treat as an unpractical consideration, the Resurrection of the dead; to look upon the unseen state as on a kind of fairy land, and the life of Angels and of Spirits as a beautiful legend, unknowable and unreal;--do we not hear, round about us, even loudly, these echoes still of the old Sadducean scepticism? The voice is, indeed, the voice of a new philosophy, but the spirit is the spirit of the Sadducees of old. And the evil--it is to be further noticed--is aggravated by special circumstances in our own country. In addition to the scepticism of earnest doubt, and the still more guilty unbelief of mere indifference, there is a wide-spread spirit, we may say, of conscientious [5/6] objection, on religious grounds, to all that bears upon the intermediate state. Our English Christianity has suffered in its recoil from the superstitions of mediaeval times. And even the purer forms of Protestantism, which have exhibited, often with singular force and beauty, the work of grace in this life, turn away altogether, as if from forbidden ground, from the life beyond, and refuse to follow the spirit into that realm of truer existence; to recognise the operations of grace and the dispensation of the Holy Ghost in that spiritual sphere. Hence, the Faith of Christ, in many earnest minds, is cut short, and bounded by the narrow horizon of this visible scene. And not only so; but yet further, the blessed influences of the unseen life are shut out from human thought and practice; a disproportionate value is given to the things that are seen; the invisible fades into comparative insignificance; and unconsciously, and even unwittingly, the tendencies of Protestantism go to swell the forces of Unbelief.

Here, then, I conceive a great work lies before the Guild of All Souls. It is yours, not only to open up many a hidden source of comfort to the mourner: to recover many a lost

fragment of precious Truth--in a [6/7] sphere where truth is especially precious--but also to leave your mark upon the scepticism of the age: with your Lord to silence, or at least to check, the Saduceeism of the day, and to proclaim a truer Philosophy of Life--one reaching beyond the barriers of the visible and the knowable; unveiling the reality of the unknown; yea, and leading up through the darkness to the Lord our God, as the "God, not of the dead, but of the living," "Whose truth endureth from generation to generation."

2. But again; a second point is worthy of our notice in the passage before us, and very instructive. I mean this: Our blessed Lord establishes the truth of the Resurrection (we observe), not by a direct statement of the doctrine, but by an *inference*. He quotes the words of Moses on a certain occasion--an allusion he made at the Bush to the departed Patriarchs, which implied, though it did not directly assert, their continued existence in the unseen state; and involved, further (by a like implication), the general conclusion, that death did not annihilate the Living Being, nor cut it off from "the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to Eternal Life." Our Lord's words are not so much a positive declaration as a [7/8] reasonable deduction--a development of Divine Truth. And in the subject-matter with which we are concerned, such a method of eliciting the truth is most instructive and assuring. For, from, the nature of the case, and under the present conditions of human life, positive knowledge about the state of the departed is not to be looked for. Holy Scripture veils the mystery, and is silent for the most part, at least in respect of explicit statement. "The souls of the righteous, indeed, are in the Hand of God." "The care of them is with the Most High." "They are in peace:" in "the bosom of Abraham:" in the Place of Waiting: they "all live unto God." But their special forms of life--the conditions by which that life is bounded, the precise nature of their fellowship with God, and of the mutual relations existing between them and the souls of their brethren yet on the earth:--these, and a variety of kindred questions are not answered in Scripture by any positive affirmation, but are left to the devout inferences and the enlightened reason of His Church.

Our Lord's treatment of this great question, then, is very significant. From certain acknowledged premisses, as we see, He draws, in the way of *inference*, a conclusion [8/9] respecting the mysterious truth. And thereby, be it observed, He sanctions a great principle. He bids us, in these deep mysteries of life, not to rest merely on the outward letter, but to gather the spirit of the Scripture. He authorises, in this very matter of the unseen world, the holy inferences of His Church, developing and interpreting the truth, not, indeed, after the wisdom or fancies of men, but under the promised guidance of the ever-present Spirit of the Truth. And this opens to us a source of boundless consolation. Within the limits of Catholic interpretation there is a wide field left free to the devout soul for the ever-expanding vision of the unseen state. The more spiritual itself becomes, the more clearly it will "discern spiritual things." As it opens the spiritual eye and ear more and more to the illuminations and the utterances of the Divine Spirit,--the more familiar will it become with these hidden mysteries,--with the forms and conditions of life in the spiritual world. The peace, the bliss, the purification of souls, the increasing sanctity, as spot after spot is cleansed away, the yearning for perfection responded to and fulfilled more and more--in a word, all the mystical fellowship of the spirit with other spirits, and with the Spirit of God, and with the Divine Presence of the Lamb in that

sphere [9/10] of perpetual light; "these, things," indeed, "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive," "but God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit," in a measure, even now, and He will reveal them more and more, as "He guides us unto all the truth."

3. Let us go on, then, in the third place, to apply to the subject before us this principle of divine interpretation--*the principle of devout inference*. Resting humbly on the abiding presence of the Spirit in the Church, let us seek, as our Lord teaches, to gather from the nature of God, from the facts of life, and the conditions of spiritual existence, *some* solution of the mysteries of the unseen state. "Some," I say, because we must be *content*, with our *present* faculties, to see through a glass *darkly*--to know only *in part*." Natural feeling often yearns--in the case of our departed ones--to know every particular of their state. The judgment of the Spirit corrects this inordinate yearning by reminding us of our necessarily-imperfect knowledge of the unseen world. Hence it is (though we may feel sometimes unsatisfied) that, in the Wisdom of God, the condition of the dead, both in the notices of Holy Scripture, and in [10/11] the language of the Liturgies, is portrayed to us, for the most part, in outline, not in detail. Still, very much that is both instructive and comforting may be gathered by us in the way of inference--of just and necessary inference. The "spirit" of the Scripture will often give life when in "the letter" there appears only deadness.

Take, e.g., "Prayers for the departed," a point round which so much of our interest in the unseen world naturally centres. The question is often asked, "How far do such prayers avail?" Let us seek humbly to gather our answer from the spirit of the Scripture.

1. First of all, these prayers (let us remember) are strictly speaking, prayers for the *living*, for all live unto God." Much of our uncertainty is removed at the outset by the mere remembrance that the departed, though taken from our sight, are still living spirits, in the actual possession of conscious life.

2. Next, the departed are spoken of in the Book of Revelations as our "brethren and fellow servants" still. Death does not break the tie of brotherhood or of [11/12] fellow-service. Therefore it does not dispense us from its duties. And one great duty of the Brotherhood is prayer for *all* the brethren.

3. Again, from the same passage, we learn that the faithful departed, though they have exchanged this scene of strife and peril for a safe Shelter, dwelling "under the Altar" of God, are not yet made perfect. Even from Paradise there goes up the cry of longings yet unsatisfied, "*How long*, O Lord, holy and true?" The process of perfection is not yet consummated. It is being carried on "yet for a season." The white robes are being handed round as if in token of an advancing purification: as the arraying of souls that wait in the Ante-Chamber till They shall be ushered in, pure and spotless, into the very presence of the Eternal: into the Light of the Everlasting.

There is, then, scope and room for the prayers of the saints on earth in behalf of their brethren and fellow servants in Paradise. If we pray for those yet in warfare, that they may persevere, shall we not also pray for those *at rest*, that they may be made perfect; that, according to the separate need of each, and the [12/13] greater measures of grace of which they are now capable, the good work begun and continued *here* "may be performed *there* until the Day of Jesus Christ?"

But the further and deeper question recurs. How far do such prayers *avail* with *God*? Within what limits is *acceptable* prayer to be offered for the dead?

Here, again, we may infer much from the teaching of Holy Scripture. All such prayers must, of course, be conditioned by the altered circumstances of the departed soul. We observe such a condition even here. If one whom we love goes from us into a distant land, our prayer for him ceases not, but its tenor is varied in accordance with the special needs and trials of his foreign life. In like manner it is with those that depart to the unseen shore beyond the waves of time. Holy Scripture lays great stress on one variation of circumstance in their condition. *This* life, it teaches, is the season of *probation*: *that* life, the season of *waiting*--of filling up that which was begun here. We cannot reverse this law of our spiritual being, even if we would. Not even the most affectionate longing must make us forgetful of the truth, that this [13/14] life is the appointed scene of our trial, and that the final destiny of the soul, according to the Divine law, is made to depend upon the choice of its will--upon its deliberate conduct--while here upon earth.

Does this seem to any to take away much of the comfort of prayer for the dead? Nay, it does but make "mercy and truth meet together," as in all the Divine dealings with man, "righteousness and peace to kiss each other." After all, we are not judges of the fulfilment of probations. God only knows all the history and all the failure of each individual life, and He only can proportion, with perfect accuracy, the "mercy" and the "truth" in each case. Shall we, then, pray for those about whose state we tremble and are afraid? and if so, how? Mark, in answer, another inference from Holy Scripture. *All* prayer is conditioned not only by the circumstances of the soul for which we pray, but further, by submission to the will of God. Even for those on earth, when we pray, we say--"If it be Thy will, O God"; and we leave the answer in the Hands of God. So let us pray--in the same spirit--for the departed; when we ask trembling, scarcely knowing whether in a particular case we may ask, "committing" our prayer "to Him that judgeth [14/15] righteously," bowing in entire submission to His will. And we know this--"If we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us." I have found it, brethren, in such cases, oftentimes, a comfort to pray thus: "O Lord, within the limits which Thou hast laid down, in so far as it is in accordance with Thy Blessed Will, Thou, Whose mercy rejoiceth against judgment, have mercy upon this soul."

But to close. We have been dwelling awhile on some of the sacred relations which subsist between us and the souls of the departed; seeking--after our Lord's guidance--to gather, from the spirit of the Scripture, some intimations of the Divine Will. Blessed shall we be if, by such thoughts, we be drawn this day a little nearer to the unseen world,--to plant

our feet more firmly upon the Mount Sion, and within the borders of the Heavenly Jerusalem;--and already to stand in our lot "amid the innumerable company of Angels," and with "the Spirits of just men made perfect!" Blessed if, in this holy hour, as we kneel before the Altar, we catch, in the distance, the echo of the Heavenly voices--the Eucharist of Souls in Paradise--and its music linger on us as we go on our way henceforth! "They sung a new song, saying, [15/16] Thou art worthy to take the Book, and to open the seals thereof: for Thou was slain, and hast redeemed us to God by Thy Blood, out of every kindred and tongue, and people, and nation."