

The Communion of Saints



A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE CHURCH OF
S. COLUMBA'S, KINGSLAND ROAD,
ON THE
EVE OF ALL SOULS' DAY,
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BY THE
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"He is not the God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto Him."--S. LUKE xx. 38.

A WRITER of our own days, speaking of the blessings which flow from finding out a truth for ourselves, says, "We are most of us content to be led blindfold along the way which our friends tell us is the path of truth: but they would be far more merciful to us, if they put a stick and a lantern into our hands, and bid us grope it out for ourselves."

Such a method of seeking truth would, perhaps, be most blessed to us if we were all of us strongminded and clearheaded, and our passions did not continually blind us. But He Who has compassion on the ignorant and erring and them that are out of the way,--the Good Shepherd, Who carries the lambs on His Shoulder, and gently leads them that are with young,--has cared more tenderly for His creatures than this. He has lighted our way from the first with the teaching of His Holy Church, "that we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine," and He has also provided means by which our love "may abound yet more and more in knowledge."

[4] For there is a sense in which we feel it to be true that what we discover for ourselves is worth more to us than what we accept in faith from others.

At first, indeed, we receive the faith once delivered to the Saints in the spirit of S. Peter when he cried "LORD, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of Eternal Life, and we believe and are sure that Thou art that CHRIST, the SON of the Living GOD." But like the grain hidden under the earth it remains for long, perhaps, to all appearance barren and lifeless; we see in it no relation to other truths, no bearing upon the welfare of mankind, no inspiring influence upon our lives. It is guiding our steps in the darkness, it preserves us from going astray; but that is all.

But days come when, either by the growth of our own minds, or through what we read and hear, or in answer to earnest meditation and prayer, the value of what we have so long cherished in ignorance becomes clear to us; it assumes its place as a factor in the great harmony of GOD's creation; it becomes a principle of life, ennobling the aspirations of mankind; or it answers to some of the most deeply felt needs of our own souls. And then, like the Apostles, we are tempted to say aloud, "Now, we believe," as though we had never believed before. The old belief has become a new and doubly prized thing to us, not because it is of more value than before, but because GOD has guided us to such a knowledge of its value as we feel ought to be an eternal possession of grace and power to our souls.

[5] And S. Paul's prayer that love may abound more and more in knowledge implies that we should never be content with accepting our faith only, but that we should endeavour to be able to "give a reason for the faith that is in us," to discern the true relations of its different parts, to see how it justifies God's ways to mankind, to feel its power in elevating their lives, and to experience its wisdom in supplying the needs of our own souls. Until our faith has to our own knowledge filled our minds with light from Heaven, and so inspired and possessed our hearts and lives that we cannot do otherwise than proclaim it to others for their blessing,--until it is dearer to us than life itself, it is ever in danger of being supplanted by something else that may for the time seem to us more life-giving, but will only lead us astray.

One practice is in all our minds to-night--that which we are pledged to promote--Prayers for the Dead: and one doctrine--the Communion of Saints--of which we feel it to be the necessary outcome and the most natural safeguard. Let us, in hope of such light as I have spoken of, seek for their foundation, examine their tendency, and dwell on their fruits in

our own experience. We shall find that the words with which our LORD JESUS CHRIST confounded the unbelieving Sadducees lie at the root of the doctrine, and are the charter of the practice; while they shed a light that can never be extinguished on the relations of both to GoD's government of the universe, to man's perfection, and to our own individual souls.

"GOD is not the GOD of the dead but of the living: [5/6] for all live unto Him." So little do the words seem at first sight to prove what our LORD was contending for, (that the dead are raised,) that some have said they do not prove it at all. But, on reflection, we find that the logic that is implied in them is so invincible that we cannot wonder that the Sadducees were put to silence.

For what do they imply? Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had sojourned in a strange land sustained by the distinct promise that GOD would give it to them and to their seed. But they died, not having received the promise: and, if, as the Sadducees contended, there was no resurrection, what possible assurance could it give to Moses in the hour of Israel's deepest affliction, that GOD was the GOD of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? He would then be but the GOD of men who had themselves never had His promise fulfilled to them, and could have no part nor lot in any fulfilment of it for their children. But with the simple words, "GOD is not the GOD of the dead but of the living: for all live unto Him," what a flood of light must have broken upon the minds of CHRIST'S hearers! Those revered names of the past were no longer mere names of those who had lived their day, to be used only as watchwords of patriotic enthusiasm, or self-righteous controversy, but having themselves no interest in the present. But in every vicissitude of Israel's history they had been interested spectators, watching over the fortunes of their descendants, and praising GOD continually as the fulfilment of the promises made to them, and His gracious purpose gradually unfolded themselves through the ages. Though withdrawn from earthly sight, they were still under the protection of [6/7] Him in Whom they trusted, and in Him they trusted still. Though no longer taking a visible part in the promotion of His earthly kingdom, they, in common with all His chosen people, were longing and praying for the fulfilment of His promise in the "city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is GOD." There, in the body, raised from the death, which will have been a mere episode in their endless life which began on earth, and is brightening more and more in Paradise to that perfect day, they will enjoy for ever the heavenly Canaan which was promised to them while still in the body. Then shall He Who claims by His great Apostle the title of the Saviour of the body be justified before the Sadducees of all ages as ever faithful to His promise, and able to sanctify and save all things which He has created.

"GOD is not the GOD of the dead, but of the living; for all live unto Him." The words thus considered plainly imply the Resurrection: but the Sadducees not only said that there was no Resurrection, but believed in neither Angel nor spirit. This also, however, with the rest of the fabric of their unbelief, falls to the ground at these words of CHRIST. That GOD should appeal to His faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob before their resurrection, proved indeed that they were looking forward in the spirit to the fulfilment of His promises in the Resurrection, but necessarily also proved by the way that they were then alive in the spirit, and sharing in the glorious hopes of their descendants. The

light of GOD'S truth and its simple harmony with His declaration of Himself in the past confounds the unbelief of men, and commends itself at once to unperverted [7/8] hearts. And that light reveals to us the saints departed in a communion so intimate with us on earth, so slightly separated by the veil of death, so closely joined to us in our dearest aspirations, that their prayers and ours are seen to tend to one and the same object--the triumph of CHRIST, and the perfection of His Elect on earth and in Paradise. That they should cease to pray for us, or we for them, would seem almost to go against that Spirit of the LORD, which filleth the world and maketh intercession for us, with groanings that cannot be uttered.

Perhaps it was only gradually that the full meaning of these simple words dawned upon the Apostles; only gradually that they realised that GOD had asserted unanswerably in them His rule over that in creation which had hitherto seemed to be most antagonistic to Him, and lit up a place in which as yet there had been only dimness and sorrow and vexation of spirit; only gradually that they saw how they declared the perfect harmony of GOD's ways; only gradually that they saw how they had been lifted by them above the world of sense into a perpetual communion with the spirits of the holy dead; that the world was no longer for them simply a world of things seen, but that they were come "unto the Heavenly Jerusalem, to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to an innumerable company of Angels." The light which had dimly broken upon them in this saying of CHRIST was to grow steadier and stronger when in the upper chamber CHRIST appeared to them after His Resurrection, and to be made an abiding possession by the descent of the HOLY SPIRIT at Pentecost. But, however this may be, the conviction of a fellowship with the [8/9] holy dead in a hope beyond the grave seems to have graven itself so deeply into their minds as to have become a principle of action, and a continual topic of exhortation to their hearers. Death in their minds seems almost to have vanished away. Their fellowship with the holy dead has led them to look for something beyond this, in which the dead as well as themselves can share.

But there is a great contrast to this in modern Christian practice. In these days earnest Christians for the most part are always preparing for death rather than the second coming of CHRIST. Our books of devotion bid us meditate once a month or oftener upon death. The prevailing weakness of modern personal religion which we strive so unsuccessfully to cure is a morbid fear of death, limiting the view to being forgiven for one's sins before death. But to the Apostles,--in the world, but not of it,--one in spirit with the countless multitude of saints departed,--a more real company to them by far than those on whom the things of time still had influence,--the very thought of death was swallowed up in victory before it reached them: and, as their Master had bidden them, they were ever "like men that wait for their lord, when he shall return from the wedding." Their animating motive, their prevailing spring of action was the judgment after death,--the hope of being prepared for their Master when He came.

So little is their spirit in this appreciated by some modern writers that it is even apologised for; some saying their eager anticipation of CHRIST'S coming was a mistake arising out of love and zeal for their Master, Whom they [9/10] had personally known; others that it was not a healthy state of mind to be always looking forward to so great a

change; and others confusing it with opinions which the Church has not adopted about a millenarian earthly reign of CHRIST. But we need not look so far to account for so natural a habit of mind in those who lived in constant spiritual communion with the saints departed and with CHRIST. It was natural for S. Paul to speak to the Thessalonians of their conversion as a "turning from idols to serve the living and true GOD, and to wait for His Son from Heaven," and to reckon that his best prayer for them was "the LORD direct your hearts into the love of GOD and into the patient waiting for CHRIST,"--to describe the daily life of the Corinthians; as a waiting for the coming of CHRIST,--to add, when he told the Philippians that their conversation was in Heaven, that thence they were expecting our SAVIOUR the LORD JESUS CHRIST,--to tell Titus, when he was exhorting the Cretans to good works, to add that GOD had called them also "to look for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great GOD and our SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST." It was natural again in S. Peter to enforce the high character which Christians should bear by adding, that they were "looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of GOD." Such a habit of disregarding the grave, and looking beyond it for the goal of their hopes was naturally fostered in those whose conversation was with the Saints and with CHRIST, who had talked with Him after His Resurrection, who had [10/11] heard His own holy words, "GOD is not the GOD of the dead, but of the living; for all live unto Him."

Thus realized in daily practice, Communion with the Saints departed in waiting for the coming of CHRIST must have transfigured the whole life of the Apostles and their converts, and made all things new to them. Living in a spiritual world, conscious of the great company of witnesses ever about them, realising that their own hopes and those of their unseen witnesses alike tended to the day of CHRIST, what wonder that the morbid fear of death was for them banished for ever. Sin, sin alone, could cloud the lives of those for whom death was but an incident in that eternal life, which looks forward to the judgment only for the consummation of its bliss. And, while they remained faithful to that holy fellowship, sin could have no power against them. "There is now, therefore, no condemnation to them that are in CHRIST JESUS, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit." No more healthy spiritual state can be conceived than the joyous and holy activity of a soul waiting for and hasting to the coming of our LORD JESUS CHRIST, rejoicing in the fellowship of the cloud of witnessess that compass us about, and therefore running with patience the race that is set before us. To pray for the dead is the natural result of such a habit of fellowship with the aspirations of departed saints, and of joining more decidedly in the Church's longing for her Master's second coming,--its result and a means of promoting it also.

"Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have [11/12] believed," our LORD tells us. And we may well believe that He Who gave Solomon riches because he was content with wisdom, often adds the blessing of knowledge to faith. "He that will do My Will shall know of the doctrine." It is much to believe; it is more to find what we have long believed filling our minds with light; more yet to find that it is a principle able to lift mankind to a higher platform of holiness. But perhaps we never learn to love a truth to the utmost, to cling to it as our very life, and to feel that it is a treasure which nothing can ever again deprive us, until it has become in some felt way a response to a deeply seated want, or

misery in our own souls. There is however no article of the Christian faith that has not this power; though He who knows all hearts will find His own time for bringing home each separate lesson of His infinite wisdom, love and power to each one of us. We can only indicate generally some ways in which this great truth of the Communion of Saints may directly answer common wants of men's souls.

In hours of doubt and despondency, or amid the sceptical clamour of the world, when we are tempted to lose sight of His universal sovereignty in Whom we trust, what shall reassure us more than this word, "GOD is not the GOD of the dead, but of the living; for all live unto Him." Yes! ours is no effete religion, hiding weak parts, blinding its eyes to difficulties and refusing to meet them. There is no part of man's chequered life which it does not provide for. The perfect harmony of GOD's plan is seen in the continued fellowship of the dead with the living, in the fulfilment of GOD's promises to them. "What shall [12/13] separate us from the love of CHRIST? I am persuaded that neither tribulation nor distress, persecution nor famine, nakedness nor peril, nor the sword, nor death nor life, nor Angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of GOD which is in CHRIST JESUS Our LORD."

Its consolation in death is evident; to those who in communion with saints departed have learnt to look beyond the grave to the judgment, death, Satan's deadliest weapon, has been turned into the gate of a higher state of being. "Death comes to set thee free. O meet him cheerily, as thy true friend!

So also in bereavement,--to live habitually in communion with saints departed is the surest path to resignation and hope when GOD calls those dearest to us to join their number.

In active Church life--which we so often feel to be degraded into a mere busy activity with no blessedness attached to it, or polluted by parish bickerings and the villainies of hypocrites, or identified with party strife,--what will calm us and restore us to ourselves more than the recollection that the bond which joins us with our fellow-workers is no mere earthly one,--not simply the working together in one parish, nor even the belief of the same creed,--but our common conversation in Heaven, our fellowship with Saints departed, our looking for the same coming of CHRIST, and, to sum all this up, our membership in the one Body and Life of JESUS CHRIST through the Sacraments.

[14] To night, then, dear brethren in Him, when we are conscious that throughout the Western Church the memory of All Saints has been filling the minds of all devout Christians, and the air seems almost to throb with their presence and sympathy, believe that our alms for the Guild of All Souls, and our prayers for the departed so constantly offered, are accepted in the sight of GOD, and according to the mind of CHRIST and His Church. They are the natural expression and necessary food of a living belief in the Communion of Saints: and who shall limit the value of that great truth to us? For it confirms our faith in the unchanging nature of GOD, and His faithfulness to His promises. It declares His universal dominion. It brings us into sympathy with the saints

departed, and loosens our hold on this world. It leads us to look forward to, and be ever prepared for the Judgment in joyful anticipation. It confirms our faith: it banishes our fear of death: it comforts us in the dark hours of bereavement: it spiritualises and sobers our daily life. And its charter is contained in the great declaration of CHRIST: "GOD is not the GOD of the dead, but of the living; for all live unto Him."