

The Purification and Repose of Departed Souls: A Sermon Preached at the Solemn Requiem for Departed Members of the Guild of All Souls, at the Church of S. Barnabas, Pimlico, on November 19th, 1891.

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"Ye shall be sorrowful; but your sorrow shall be turned into joy."--S. John xvi. 20.

THESE words of our Lord were uttered, you will recollect, just before His departure: as His Human Spirit stood upon the verge of the Unseen World.

The Shadow of that World may be seen, in a sense to rest upon them; and to add to their solemnity. They seem specially fitted to guide our meditations at this solemn moment, as we offer to-day our Requiem Eucharist for our departed Brethren.

Let us turn to them for a few moments.

I.

There are many deeply interesting questions upon which the words before us may throw light; whether we apply them to the condition of the mourner in his earthly sorrow, of the Departed Spirit that has passed beyond the sorrows of earth into the mysteries of the Intermediate State.

But I would confine your attention this morning to *one* [3/4] *question* of deep moment, which often perplexes us; a mystery to which we may find, at least, a partial clue in the words of our text. I mean this:--

How is it possible for us to reconcile the idea of *perfect Rest* in the departed with that other element in their condition,--The purifying process by which the Spirit at Rest is made meet for the fulness of its joy? The thought of Purgatory and the thought of Repose seem, to our sight, almost to involve a contradiction.

It is hard, I mean, for us, with our present powers of spiritual insight, to harmonize the two thoughts; to hold the balance equably between the two, and to assign to each its due proportion in our conceptions of the life of the departed. I suppose, really, that the point of contact between the two,--the point at which the two lines of thought blend and unite,--lies beyond the reach of our vision, hid in the yet impenetrable mystery which shrouds that unseen world.

Still, somewhere, the two lines converge; the two ideas harmonize; the Repose of Souls blends with their Purification, and their Purification, as it advances, deepens their Repose.

"After the Fire," as in the Prophet's experience on the Mount, comes "a still, small Voice." The Purifying Fire searches and cleanses; but the cleansing discipline is

succeeded immediately by the Voice of Peace; and in the deepening echoes of that Voice, as the soul draws nearer [4/5] and nearer to its Lord, all the anguish and pain are swallowed up.

Even here upon earth, in the earthly discipline of sorrow, we know something of this Voice of Peace which "turns our sorrow into joy." The Paradox of the Apostle is realized in the experience of the Spiritual Life, even in this lower state:--"joyful in tribulation:" and in the seeming contradiction between joy and suffering is, in a certain measure harmonized even now in that Peace of God, "which passeth all understanding." Yes, it is so, in a measure, here on earth. It is so, more and more, as the Spiritual Life develops. How much more, then,--more than we are able to conceive now,--will this harmony between Purification and Repose be perfected in that fuller development of the Spiritual Being, which takes place within the veil, when the quickened consciousness of the disembodied spirit realizes depths of Peace hitherto unknown; opening out before it more and more fully at each step in the Purifying Process, at each stage of its advance to the Beatific Vision, and revealing, in the ever progressing illumination, higher, and yet higher meanings in these words of our Blessed Lord:--

"Ye now therefore have sorrow: but your sorrow shall be turned into joy."

II.

Yes, "Sorry turning into Joy!" The Pain, the Suffering, the Purification, transfigured with the Light of the Divine Purpose, and with ever increasing revelations [5/6] of the Divine Love, until the very Sorrow becomes itself the Joy! as in a measure, here upon earth, so yet more fully in the Life beyond.

But again: when (as on occasions like the present), our hearts turn instinctively to that Life within the Veil, and we long for some indication of its conditions, and of its relation to our Life--we cannot fail, I think, to be struck by the contrasts under which it is shadowed out to us in Scripture.

It is not so much that Scripture is silent on the subject. On the contrary, as the Revelation of Scripture advances from the Old Testament to the New; and then, again, from the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Passion to those of the Resurrection and the Ascension,--human thought is directed more and more steadily to the Spiritual World, and to the Life that lies beyond the frontiers of time and sense; to our Lord Himself within the Veil, and to the great multitude, growing ever greater and greater, of the souls assembling there, and to the "Rest which remaineth for the People of God." And as the volume of Revelation closes in with the visions of S. John, it is this very Life within the Veil, surely, and its scenes and incidents of mystery and of bliss which form the main topic of the concluding chapters of the Bible.

No, it is hardly true to say, as is often said, that Holy Scripture is silent on these points. It leads us up indeed, to them, slowly, cautiously, reverently; but it is always leading us thitherward; through prophesy, and type, and [6/7] mystery, and vision; and it leaves us,

at last in its latest book, in the very midst of this invisible world; on the "Mount Sion, and the City of the Living God, the Heavenly Jerusalem," and "amid the innumerable company of the angels, and with the Spirits of just men made Perfect." Nor does it merely leave us there. It creates, by its revelations of that life, and the rich imagery under which it is described,--the Spotless Robes, and the Victorious Palms, and the Living waters, and the unnumbered multitude, and the everlasting Worship day and night,--it creates a profound impression of its exceeding greatness and its permanence, which the Apostle S. Paul has emphasized in his well-known description of the true attitude of the Christian mind, when he says:--

"We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

No, it is not the silence of Scripture which perplexes us. It is rather, one may say, the fullness and complexity of its language, which constitutes our difficulty.

I mean that the Life within the Veil is pictured to us under so many and varying aspects, with such diverse and, as it seems to us, conflicting features, that we are forced to recognize the fact that we stand in the presence of mysteries, which our present faculties have not the power fully to conceive or adjust.

[8] If, for instance, we take the Book of the Revelations alone, we observe not only how largely descriptive it is from beginning to end, of the scenes of that Life; but further, how, in all these descriptions there occur so frequently seeming contradictions, or at least, contrasts as yet unharmonized.

The perplexity on which we have been touching is one, but not the only one that meets us as we pass, in spirit, through the mystic gates into the Court of Paradise.

The Life, as we have seen, presented to us, is one of Repose, and yet of Purification. But more than this: it is also described as a life of growing Satisfaction of all human desire; for "they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;" and yet at the same time of longings which are unfulfilled; "For they cry, How long, O Lord, Holy and True?" Again: the Souls of the Faithful are said to sleep in Jesus, and yet they live a life of conscious activity; worshipping, adoring, "crying with a loud voice."

Once more; their life is a life of Rest and yet also of Progress. "They rest," and "they rest not." They are "under the Altar," as in a Shelter and a Resting-place; "where the sun lights not upon them nor any heart." And they advance; they are ever advancing as "the Lamb, Who is in the midst of the Throne doth lead them on to living Fountains of Waters."

[9] Observe the rich variety of figure under which Life in the Spiritual World is described to us.

And here let me make *two* brief remarks.

I. First, we gather that the life is clearly a very complex one; surpassing, in its range and variety, our present comprehension. Hence these seemingly conflicting features in the descriptions of it. And we are unable, with our present faculties, fully to harmonize the conflicting ideas; just as indeed so often happens in the case of the Truths and Doctrines of the Faith, here on earth, when presented to the finite understanding. We fail to reconcile the seeming contradiction; to see, e.g., how the freedom of the Human Will is compatible with the Divine Predestination, or the Boundlessness of the Mercy of God with His unerring Justice.

In these perplexities, and in the perplexing question before us,--the co-existence, in the Life within the Veil, of the conditions of Purification and Repose, we must needs fall back on the obvious, but too often forgotten fact, that as yet "we see only through a glass darkly;" "we know only in part."

2. And next, as a second remark; It is of the greatest importance in our conceptions of that life, not to lay undue stress on *any one* of its features or aspects to the exclusion of the rest. This has ever been a fruitful source of error. Some minds have dwelt so exclusively on the thought of Purgatory as to have eliminated altogether [9/10] the idea of Repose and Peace. On the other hand, the idea of mere Repose has become sometimes so absolutely dominant as to have reduced the life of the spiritual world to one of mere unconsciousness and inactivity.

Surely we shall approach nearer to the truth,--as near, perhaps, as to our limited faculties is possible,--if we keep steadily before the spiritual eye all the richly blended Vision of the Scripture, even with its Mystery: the Picture, with all its contrasts and shadows, and its yet indistinct outline: waiting for the full Revelation, and, as we wait, seeking for a more Spiritual understanding, for more of that Spiritual mind, which even here begins to discern already the Mysteries of the Spiritual world:--the things, "which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive, but which God hath revealed unto us by His Spirit."

III.

And once more: to bring the question before us to a practical issue. It suggests to us three brief reflections.

I. First: It invests with deep significance those simple, primitive prayers which we offer, sometimes too unthinkingly, for the departed: "May they rest in peace: and let light perpetual shine upon them!"

This Prayer is no mere pious aspiration. Nay, it takes into account *all* the mystery of the Life within the Veil: all that strange and searching Discipline whereby the [10/11] spirit is cleansed more and more from the stains of sin, and made ready for the Beatific Vision. And by the Prayer we mean this: "Lord, give to the souls of the faithful, through this cleansing, ever-deepening Peace:" and "make darkness to be Light before them:" whatever shadows may hang still around the yet unperfected soul dissolve them in the

Light perpetual, even in that Light streaming forth from the Face of God, in which is no darkness at all."

2. Secondly: The thought of the Repose and Peace of our brethren departed brings into special prominence the Virtue of the Passion of Christ.

The Promises of Peace,--of Peace through the Blood of the Cross,--culminate in the Paradise of God.

Here in our earthly struggles, we have Peace through the Precious Blood. There, in the Resting-Place of souls, they too have Peace,--more perfect Peace. But,--whether *here* or *there*,--that Peace is the Fruit, the ever ripening Fruit, of the Passion of Jesus Christ: "The Lamb, as It had been slain," Whose Sacrifice is offered even in the midst of the Throne."

When our Lord said to the Penitent on Calvary,--"To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise,"--He intimated that the Virtue of His Passion would reach on beyond the closing scene on earth, even into the invisible world, and there be fully manifested.

[12] When, "being put to death in the flesh, but quickened in the spirit, He went and preached unto the spirits in prison," He revealed the Fact that the virtue of His Passion was not confined to the souls of men here on earth, but extended, and that mightily, into the realm of spirits, effecting even there deliverance to the captives, and the opening of the Prison to them that were bound." It is well to reflect on this. For it serves to direct us as to the scope and purport of our Prayers for the departed. It suggests to us very forcibly, that in all such prayers, we should plead especially the Passion of our Lord. We know, we can, at the best, know but very little of the exact condition of the soul in the sight of God, as it passes hence. But we are sure of the Virtue of the Passion here. And we are sure of the Virtue of the Passion there.

And, where grace has not been quenched by impenitence, we may pray, not indeed presumptuously, but in simple, trustful submission to the will of God, for that cleaning and that Peace which flows from the Blood of the Redeemer, in the Stream that purifies the souls of men:--here, indeed, in part, but there, more and more perfectly: there, where the spirit is clothed upon with the robes "which are washed and made white in the Blood of the Lamb.'

For the spiritual eye, as it seeks to penetrate the Veil, rests still upon "the LAMB as It had been slain," even "in [12/13] the midst of the Throne." And upon the spiritual ear, as it listens for the voices that speak to it from within the Veil there falls unceasingly the Chant of the Great Sacrifice,--the Hymn of the all-prevailing Passion, whose Virtue reaches even to the Throne of God: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain."

3. Thirdly and lastly: if the Peace of the departed points to the Virtue of the Passion in the Realm of spirits, not less does their Purification suggest the abiding influences of the Holy Ghost in that Invisible Realm.

He Who sanctifies all the elect people of God does not cease, surely, to sanctify them when they pass out of the conditions of the flesh into those of the spirit. He Who is the quickening and animating Force of the whole Body of Christ withdraws not surely His living energies from that Portion which has become distinctly spiritual: nay, rather, one may reverently suppose, penetrates more intensely with His purifying grace the spirits of men delivered from the burden of the flesh: "witnessing with our spirit that we are the children of God."

Here, again, when, musing, lovingly and sorrowfully, on some dear departed soul, we ask anxiously how or what shall we pray for, an answer is suggested to us.

Pray for the purifying and perfecting Influences of the Holy Spirit, for His guidance into Fuller Light, for that transformation by the Spirit into the Image and Likeness [13/14] of the Lord, wherein it shall see Him in the Beatific Vision; and be re-united at length to its own body, spiritual and incorruptible, which we may yet behold again, and, when we behold, recognise in the radiance of its glory.

Yes: the Virtue of the Passion and the Power of the Holy Ghost; these--we remember--are the great, central Verities of the Eucharistic Mystery.

It is this Sacrifice of the Lamb which we offer and plead in every Eucharist. It is this Power of the Holy Ghost, whereby, in that Mystery, the Incarnate Lord is ever present with us.

And these same Verities are the "Powers of the World to come:"--"The Lamb as It had been slain," and "the Seven Spirits which are before His Throne."

Around these great Truths our prayers, our longings, our thanksgivings centre, here at the earthly Altar. And there, in the Perpetual Eucharist within the Veil, our departed brethren are contemplating, day and night, the same Mysteries: gazing upon the same Sacrifice, purified more and more by the same Spirit, and, together with us, adoring Him, in the Light of Whose Presence all "sorrow shall be turned into joy."