

## SUNDAY MORNING NO. 148A

### MANNA VERSUS FLESHPOTS

Let us lift our eyes from the oppressiveness of the present moment and look up and down, before and behind, and take our proper bearings. A hundred years ago, we all now assembled were in prospect. There were many busy people then as now, but we were not there. If you wish to have this forcibly brought home to you, go into the office of any old newspaper—the *Times* for example—and ask to see the back file for 1783. There you see the columns with advertisements of all sorts—businesses to dispose of—articles lost—merchandise for sale; and in other columns, reports of meetings and paragraphs of the movements of men and armies. These represent multitudes of once busy people—people as busy and concerned as now—people full of enterprise, full of anxiety, full of the ideas of the moment of all sorts, but people who now are one and all in their graves—life's fever over and life's folly sealed in death. We had no place among them: our day had not yet come. We were in prospect.

But now our turn has come. Here we are, going through our part in the programme of the ages. We walk over the graves of our fathers, but heed them not. We are absorbed in our own interests, our own anxieties, our own pleasures. This is all very natural. But we shall not be wise to remain under the dominion of the purely natural. The purely natural is ignorance, shortsightedness, unwisdom, wickedness. We want to get higher and live higher than the merely natural man. We want to realise **the true** in the midst of the clamours of the merely apparent. The merely apparent would say to us that things will remain just as they are. By the true, we know that this is a lie. Just as certainly as we were in prospect 100 years ago, so certainly, in the ordinary course of things (leaving out of view the coming of the kingdom of God), shall we in 100 years more be in retrospect. Every one of us now living and here assembled will have disappeared from the land of the living, when this year's file of newspapers is a hundred years old.

We can turn this obvious reflection to great use, if we use it wisely. Of course, if there were no other truth, it would be vain to burden our imaginations with one so gloomy. But there is another truth. Our meeting here this morning means that we recognise another truth, viz., that not only are men subject to death, but that—

*“There shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and of the unjust.”*

This other truth is also as certain as that at which we have glanced. It is not a speculation or an ecclesiastical dogma. It is a truth proclaimed with God's own attestation in the wonders performed by Jesus and the disciples, and sealed and guaranteed to us by Christ's own authenticated resurrection. Consequently, the fact of our mortality stands very differently situated from what it would do if in this life only we had hope. It becomes a fact which it is wise and useful to recall and look at and realise, and have in continual remembrance.

Seeing the certainty that our present lives will by-and-bye be in retrospect—a thing to be looked back upon, and not by others only, but by ourselves, when we recall the resurrection standpoint—is it not a reasonable subject of solicitude as to how it will look when so regarded? Would it be wise to live in total indifference to this? There can probably be but one answer to this—as a matter of theory at all events. There is probably not a human being who would not wish that when this life is past with him, it should be such as the looking back upon would cause satisfaction. Such a wish must necessarily be entertained by everyone here present. It is the wish of common wisdom—of common reason. Now, how to give effect to it, —that is the question. Mere wishing is proverbially worthless. Let us get away from empty wishes—from idle dreams. Let our wishes have effect. If we desire the retrospect of our lives to be satisfactory, let us use the moments as they fly in such a way as will make it so. Here, two things are necessary; correctness of view, and stoutness of determination: clear sight as to what will constitute a satisfactory retrospect, and indomitable purpose to achieve it in the teeth of all obstacles.

What will be a satisfactory retrospect? Most people when they come to die are the reverse of satisfied with the life that lies behind them. Almost one and all have to say they have been fools. Few are able to say that if they had their time to live over again, they would do just as they had done. Now, from this, let us, the living and the well, take warning. Now is our opportunity of laying the foundation of the answer of a good conscience toward God. It is now that the account is forming which will be inspected at the judgment seat of Christ. If we let our opportunity go and live the life of fools, the verdict will be against us on that solemn—that dreadful occasion. Christ will not say, “*Well done, good and faithful servants*” to those who have not been good and faithful. Much will be forgiven to good and faithful servants, but good and faithful servants they must be. They must not be able truthfully to say what the liturgy of the Church of England makes the people say every Sunday, “We have done those things which we ought not to have done, and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done.” If this is our case, there is no hope for us: for every man will receive according to his deeds. (2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 22:12.) We must at least be able to say, “Lord, we have endeavoured to do, and, in measure, have done, the things Thou hast commanded us to do: wherein we have failed, in Thy mercy forgive. We confess ourselves unprofitable servants. In all that we may have done, we have but done that which it was our duty to do.”

This, in substance, is what the Lord asks us to be able to say on that day. It indicates the nature of a scripturally satisfactory retrospect. This may briefly be defined as a doing during our lifetime of what the Lord requires us to do; and what the Lord requires us to do, is to be learnt from the Scriptures alone. We need not listen to human precepts and human teachings at all. The pulpit and the press are misleading altogether. The Spirit of God speaking to us in prophet and apostle, is the only safe guide and standard. Its voice has been preserved for us in the Scriptures, and we have it in our power to listen and obey, and thus be “led of it” unto life everlasting. We have been listening to this voice in our readings this morning, and at one or two features of it, we will glance for our profit.

In the chapter read from Isaiah, we have these inspiring words:

*“Since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside Thee, what He hath prepared for them that waiteth for Him.”*

Whether this be an exact translation of the Hebrew or not, we are saved from all uncertainty as to its meaning by the rendering of it into Greek performed by Paul under the guidance of the Spirit. (1 Cor. 2:9.)

*“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.”*

The meaning of this is sufficiently obvious. Some may prefer the more moderate construction of the words, which would simply intimate that to revelation alone are we indebted for any conception of the purpose of God concerning the future, or that that future will not come as the evolution of any force or process now in operation upon earth. Both these meanings are, doubtless, correct, and involved in the words. But we should not go far wrong if we gave the words a higher wing, and understood them to mean that it is beyond human imagination to conceive the excellence of the goodness which is waiting for those who please God. This is, doubtless, the case. Who can conceive the gladness and strength of the spirit-body? Who can imagine the joy of intercourse with angelic society? Who can realise beforehand the happiness and the honour of being confessed by Christ before the Father and the angels, and assigned a place of power and glory in the Kingdom of God triumphant in all the earth? Who can enter into the quiet ecstasy with which glorified saints must view the prospect of immortality—life and gladness without end?

In every sense “*it hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive*” the glorious experience lying in store with God for those who please Him. And these things are not fables or poetic fancies. They are not even possible mistakes. They are all in the region of sobriety and fact. They rest upon promises that God has demonstrably made, and the truth of which He has authenticated and made sure in the glorious life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Let us then rejoice in this great light that has sprung up in the land of darkness and of the shadow of death. Let us open our minds to the sunshine

that lies ahead. Let us not give in to the depression of the cloud that belong to the life of our vanity. Let us remember with David, if ever we are tempted to think it is too good to be true, or that the present darkness is an insupportable enigma, that “this is our infirmity.” It is but the feeling of frail flesh, which is no more to be trusted as an indication of truth than wearied feelings of night are to be trusted as to the subject of the coming daylight. God’s purpose will come even if we lie down with previous generations in the dust. And if death itself is no obstacle, surely our feelings are but as the morning mist that will vanish before the rising sun.

Our gladness needs but to be tempered with the recollection that this coming goodness is “*for him that waiteth for Him.*” There is a good deal involved in this. We all know the idea of waiting for a person: don’t begin without him. Though this is not literally the idea in relation to God, still there is a good deal of this in it. God proposes a variety of things in which men are liable not to wait for Him, but to help themselves. He proposes to avenge the injuries of the righteous; and He tells them to “*wait for Him*” in this matter.

*“Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves; I will repay, saith the Lord;”—*

That is, when Christ returns to inaugurate the day of vengeance (Isa.63) and to execute vengeance upon all the ungodly (Jude). He proposes to bestow glory and honour upon His people: but He tells them to wait for Him in the matter, and not to seek the honour of men, but the honour that cometh from God only (John 5:44), the honour viz., that God will bestow at the coming of Christ, when every accepted man’s work will be “*found unto praise, and honour, and glory at the appearing of Christ.*” He proposes to confer wealth and pleasure upon His people: but He tells us to “*wait:*” to deny ourselves now: to lay not up treasure upon earth, and seek not pleasure in the Lord’s absence in a world that denies Him.

All these things are beautifully shadowed forth in Christ’s brief reply to the question of the disciples of John, recorded in the chapter that was read from the New Testament (Matt. 9). They came to Jesus and wanted to know why his disciples did not fast as his interrogators, and the Pharisees, did. His answer was, Because he was with them: “*but,*” added he, “*the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.*” Now, although it was literal fasting that the questioners of Christ spoke of, Christ’s answer went beyond this. It was his custom to speak in figure, and he easily caught at this figure of fasting. There is a higher fasting than abstaining from literal food. God told Israel, by Isaiah, that he had no particular pleasure in the literal and ceremonial fasting that had become rife in their midst:

*“Is it such a fast that I have chosen,” said he (Isa. 58:5), “a day for a man to afflict his soul—to bow down his head, like a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen—to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressor go free, and that ye break every yoke?” etc., etc.*

The fasting then that is acceptable to God is to abstain from wickedness and things forbidden—to “*wait for him*” in that course of righteous self-denial that honours and pleases Him, and will receive His approbation in the day of manifestation.

*“They shall not be ashamed that wait for me.”*

Are we waiting? Are we fasting? Do we accept the position of strangers and pilgrims in the present evil world? Or do we do the reverse and claim its citizenship, appropriate its rights and privileges and avail ourselves of the various pleasures it provides for its children?

These are important questions as determining our status in the day when our present life will be a retrospect. We are liable to weary in the right way. It is needful, therefore, to rally ourselves. Paul asks us, with this view, to consider Israel under Moses, whose movements and relations in the wilderness, he says, were a figure, and were “*written for our admonition.*” (1 Cor. 10:11.) You recollect God fed them with manna, and with manna only. He might have provided them with every good thing: but He did not do so. He had an object in view. Moses defines this object in Deut. 8:3.

*“He fed thee with manna . . . **that He might make thee know** that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord.”*

Thus the object was a spiritual one, i.e., the imparting to their minds a spiritual discernment by a physical discipline. God aimed at the exercise of their minds through the deprivation of their appetites. Now, there is an analogy to this in our experience. We are going through this wilderness to the land of promise: and God has given us manna as the food of our pilgrimage. What this antitypical manna is Christ has instructed us. He tells us that he is the bread of God which has come down from heaven to give life to man. The manna then is the word of eternal life. This word God has given us. We are liable to tire of the manna, as Israel did. Israel remembered the flesh pots—the leeks, and the garlic, and other stimulating condiments—of Egypt, and murmured at the monotonous manna. Paul says,

*“Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured.”*

There is an object in the self-denial we are all called upon to exercise: an object in being called upon to let *“the word of Christ (the manna) dwell richly within us.”* It is a mental object, as in the case of Israel. It is that we may be conformed to the image of His son. God knows (and we may see) that this conformity could not be produced if we were at liberty to subsist on the mental food that is palatable to the children of this world. The highly-seasoned literature—in poetry and prose—of a generation that knows not God; the sensuous excitements of the stage and the concert hall that pander to the gratifications and draw the purses of the unsanctified Adamic mob, are not calculated to form or feed the new man of the spirit. Rather will they blight and sicken and kill any germ of him that the truth may have generated, and leave the house of the mind *“empty, swept, and garnished,”* ready for the reception of a new legion of the unclean. It is for our good, then, that we are called upon to fast, to leave the old flesh-pots alone, and to be content with the manna from heaven.

The self-denial is only for a few brief mortal years. It will end when its object is accomplished. Fitted by the discipline of the wilderness for admission to the Father’s abiding fellowship, we shall be set free from the tutelary restraints of probation, and admitted to a liberty of joy and entertainment, such as no son of licence ever tasted—joy on a higher plane than has ever entered into his earth-cleaving soul to conceive of—everlasting joy in God and in all creation. In all senses, the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us.

Taken from: - “The Christadelphian” of 1883

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By Bro. Robert Roberts