

A COMING FESTIVAL OF SONG

We have just been singing. It belongs to the business that brings us together that we should sing. In doing this, we give thanks: we pray; and we rouse memory concerning *“things not seen as yet.”* It is therefore, as the scriptures declare, *“a good and pleasant thing to sing praise.”* It is a matter in which Jesus left us an example, as in many other things. When he instituted this memorial ordinance, we read that with the disciples, *“he sang an hymn.”* That singing by 12 male voices in unison would be a different singing from what we have had this morning. It would be a sad kind of singing for the men were sad. Jesus himself had said,

“One of you will betray me.”

Of the disciples, he said,

“Because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your hearts.”

But though a sad singing, it would lay hold of the joy latent in every expression of the Truth. The joy of the Truth is of that nature that sorrow itself is sometimes needful to bring it out.

Our singing this morning is a very different singing from what will be heard in the Crystal Palace, London, tomorrow, when 4,000 trained voices, assisted by several hundreds of stringed instruments, flutes, oboes, drums, and trumpets, will unite in the performance of Handel’s Messiah. That will be a melodious tempest overpowering in its suggestions to every enlightened mind that may be present among the 20,000 listeners. But our apocalyptic reading brings before us a performance that will as much outstrip performances as the Crystal Palace performance outstrips our puny effort. John heard 144,000 performers, whose performance could only fitly be described as the roar of many waters and the sound of mighty thunderings. In point of magnitude alone, think of the difference between 4,000 and 144,000—not that we need to suppose the number limited to 144,000. That is a mystical number expressive of completeness in the Israel of God, on the basis of the root-number 12. The assembly will likely be incomparably vast, in view of the numberlessness of the attendant angels, and the numberlessness of the attendant angels, and the numberlessness of the locust and horse agents employed under the earlier trumpets. But suppose the symbolic number were literal—suppose it were only 144,000. Where is the Crystal Palace performance in comparison with it? This is even supposing the 144,000 were mortals like the Crystal Palace performers. Instead of that, they have been subjected to a change that transformed their nature. They are no longer corruptible and weak. They have put on immortality, and therefore have experienced the unspeakable emancipation implied in the terms of contrast employed by Paul when he speaks of the present earthy nature as weakness in comparison with power; dishonour in comparison with glory; a natural body in comparison with a spiritual body.

This difference involves so many differences that we do well to ponder them a little for encouragement: for by the truth, we stand related to that coming festival of joy which will wipe out for ever the bitter memories that belong to the present wilderness of our probation. Let us try and realise them so far as a very one-sided experience can enable us to do so.

The Crystal Palace performance will be very impressive to the beholder—very picturesque, very striking: but take it to pieces, what is in itself? Mere sound and millinery. The well-dressed performers perform with an inflating sense of the public presence, and having sounded their sounds, and spent their strength, they disperse to their houses and their closet skeletons, and their anxieties and their envies, and the thousandfold vanities that constitute human life as it now is. —How different with the 144,000! —picturesque truly as no human conclave ever approached, but how much more than picturesque. Think of the reality, the sincerity, the worth, the fervid appreciation in every individual performer. Think of it as an assembly of picked men and women—picked on divine principles—and picked out not merely to take part in a musical performance, but to occupy a position and perform a part of which the musical performance is but the public and formal expression. The Crystal Palace performance will end, and its elements disperse; it is an ephemeral beauty, like the prismatic bubble. It is over and done with when the admittance fees are duly counted, and the doors

closed, and the gas turned off. It has nothing in it of substantial blessing for a living soul. It is a mere luxury for the well-to-do who can afford to be sentimental. Whereas, the orchestral celebration of the 144,000 will be but the top branch of a tree of blessedness under which all nations will rest, and all woes be healed: for the performers are the assembled heads of mankind, who are heads not for their own glory but the glory of God and the good of mankind.

Consider the contrast as regards what we might call the internal structure of the thing. The Mount Zion festival is pinned together at the centre. The multitudinous assembly has a head towards whom all the interest of the performance converges; as the root from which the whole has sprung. There is a history in the case which fills every heart with enthusiasm.

“Thou art worthy to receive power and riches, and wisdom and honour, and glory and blessing.”

We all know the difference between a meeting convened to discuss a resolution, and one summoned to welcome a hero. Even a political meeting at which a popular leader is present has a colour and a snap, and a fervour entirely lacking when only an abstract question is in hand. Personal feeling and personal affection are roused in the one and dormant in the other. If this is the case with politics, how much more with mere music. A music meeting is a very mild kind of meeting—exciting human gratification on the surface only. There is none of the personal enthusiasm that is excited by touch with men and measures that affect the deepest interests. In this respect the Crystal Palace festival has but the coldness of moonbeams in comparison with that of Mount Zion. At the Mount Zion festival, Christ, the loving head of all God’s children, is present as the centre of the proceedings, the subject of the music, the object of the rapturous sentiments expressed. It may be said that Christ is the subject of the Handel performance; truly so, but in how different a way—merely as a nominal theme, exciting no more personal feeling than if it were Adonis or Apollo, or any other mythical conception. It is not the greatness of Christ that is felt by the audience, but the “genius” of Handel, and the cleverness of the performers. In the Mount Zion performance, the all-prevalent sentiment is that which fulfils the Scripture:

“To him every knee shall bow and every tongue confess.”

Every man and woman in the assembly will be a lover of Christ in no feigned manner: a lover whose love will have been fanned into a bright flame by the change to the incorruptible; whose immortal strength will preclude fatigue in the exercise; and whose everlasting place in the House of God as a companion king with Christ and possessor of all things, will ensure a devotedness which there will be no competing pre-occupation to weaken or dim.

Now, brethren and sisters, this is no fancy picture. It is the anticipation of reality. It is the joy set before us in connection with the service—the mortifying service, to which we are called in this age of evil. The truth is guaranteed to us in every way the subject admits of. Peter tells us that he and the other apostles had not followed cunningly devised fables in promulgating the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ. *“We were eye-witnesses,”* he says. Peter was an eye-witness. If an evil heart of unbelief suggest that Peter may have been mistaken in what he thought he saw when he saw Christ work miracles, and Christ alive after his crucifixion, then we have the other apostles. *“At the mouth of two or three witnesses,”* testimony is accepted everywhere. Twelve men were not likely to be all the subjects of delusion. If the doubting heart says, “Perhaps it was even so,” perhaps 12 men were all the subjects of inexplicable delusion, then there are the seventy disciples to fall back on. They all saw what the 12 saw, and they all worked miracles in his name, for they *“returned with joy”* to the Lord after a journey in twos and twos all through the land. As if that were not enough, God has given us the testimony of *“500 brethren at once,”* who saw the Lord after his resurrection. And as if to put a top stone to the structure of personal testimony, we have Saul of Tarsus, turned from a persecutor to a faithful apostle by a personal vision of the Lord and commission from him. What other historical occurrence has such a multitude of personal witnesses?

The guarantee does not stop there. God allowed for the possibility of men saying the witnesses were crazed. He therefore *“confirmed their words with signs following”*—signs and wonders, real miracles, none of your pretended feats in which malice tries to class them. The

witnesses tell us this was the case, and not a single good reason can be given why we should reject this testimony. Paul knew whether he spoke with tongues more than all the Corinthian believers, and so did the Corinthians to whom he makes the assertion (1 Cor. 14:18). Did he declare a falsehood? If so, it is inconsistent with the whole character of the man. He declared falsehood without a motive, of which even a hypocrite is not guilty. If he did not declare a falsehood, then behold the guarantee in the miraculous gift of languages, for what man by natural power can speak languages he never learnt? Besides, the wide-spread reception of the apostolic testimony, in the teeth of authority, tradition, and self-interest compels us to believe the assertion of the witnesses—that God worked with them and confirmed their word with signs following; for if that statement is not true, it is utterly impossible to account for the incontrovertible historical fact that before the apostles were in their graves, thousands upon thousands throughout the Roman empire believed their testimony.

And God has given us another guarantee in addition to all that. Fulfilled prophecy is proclaiming in trumpet tones from day to day that the word of God is true. Men may not hear the sound through having their ears stuffed with various materials, but the sound is there. The sound has gone out unto all the earth and the word “*to the ends of the world.*” If there was no other prophecy than the one read this morning that would be enough: the prophecy of Christ’s first appearing.

“He shall grow up before him as a tender plant, as a root out of a dry ground. He hath no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men . . . we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted . . . He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who shall declare his generation? For he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken” (Isa. 53).

This is an exact picture of what happened when Christ presented himself to Israel, as everyone knows, and an exact foreshadowing of the character which the death of Christ assumed in the preaching of the Apostles. It was written 800 years before Christ appeared. On this there is no difference of opinion even among the hostile critics. How, then, are we to account for its fulfilment? There is only one principle that yields a satisfactory answer. God gave the prophecy by the Spirit, and therefore God was in the events foreshadowed. You know this is only a single case in which the same evidence arises. You know that prophecy has been fulfilled in hundreds of events, ancient and modern, and is fulfilling now, before our eyes, as it has been for forty years past.

Now, if men will not believe the testimony of a multitude of eye-witnesses, nor surrender to the divine attestation which that testimony must have received in the shape they allege; nor discern the evidence of a long stream of fulfilled prophecy, what are we to say? They are not so insensible to evidence in other matters. Their insensibility in this case must be due either to the want of fulness of sight as to the facts, or a want of susceptibility to conviction in the direction of the facts. It is probably owing a little to both. Men as a rule do not take the pains necessary to know all the facts upon which conviction is based: and as a rule their inclinations bias them against conviction. They feel that they would prefer the Bible were not true. Well, brethren and sisters, if we are in the happy position of knowing and believing, let us not boast or even give way to the least feeling of complacency. Humble gratitude is the only sentiment befitting true intelligence.

It may be asked why there should be this continuous reference to evidence? Answer, because there is a continuous assault on faith. The air is full of opposition to the Bible; and between the onslaughts of hostile polemics without, and the active vitality of an evil heart of unbelief within (for ignorance is native to every human brain, and unbelief is the result of ignorance in the case of any matter that is true), there is danger in a passive attitude. The command to assemble together has this as its *raison d’être*, that we may “*build one another up in our most holy faith.*” This is a mental process accomplished by mental implements. To edify is to make conviction strong, and this will do the rest.

As we look, then, on this spread table, we behold the converging point of past and future in relation to Christ. It is a pledge and memento of the sad meeting at which he said—

“With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,”

And at which he sang with them the earnest hymns without those helpful accessories which we are permitted to enjoy this morning. It is also a token, when rightly interpreted, of that coming meeting of so very different a character when surrounded by the joyous 144,000, he will be able to say with some meaning,

“In the midst of my brethren will I sing praise.”

Personally, we may look forward to that time with a directness of interest that cannot pertain to any other public occasion. It is not only a festival of praise: it is a feast of love, based on approval. Every man and woman in that assembly will be an object of personal affection to the Lord who is at the head of it. In their totality, they are his bride; but in their detail, he is each one's particular lover and friend. Such a delightful relation of things would not be possible in mortal nature. Mortal power is too limited to allow of personal friendships beyond a certain number; but to the Spirit of God, there is no limit. It will be possible for each individual saint to feel that he has Christ all to himself without coming between Christ and any other member of the one body. So also will each saint feel to saint. Love will go round without stint and without the reserves imposed by the known imperfections of present experience. It will be love based upon harmony—based upon identical minds.

The prelude to such a true “love feast” is necessarily, the judgment at which the Lord presides before the Mount Zion festival. There must be separations and harmonisations before such a love feast is possible. It is that we may rightly adjust ourselves beforehand to this searching and impartial process that the Lord has favoured us with so many indications of the principles on which it will be conducted. He presses these upon us when he says—

“I judge no man, the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him at the last day.”

That is, His judgment will not be an affair of personal partiality as among human judges: the facts in each man's case will determine the results. He will make the facts manifest: and herein His judgment lies. In a sense, the verdict is self-recording. He tells us before-hand in the messages to the seven ecclesias, read this morning, that the coronal wreath is to *“him that overcometh”*; this is a work accomplished now, but perhaps not discerned now except by divine eyes alone. The fact will be made manifest then, pro or con, with joy or sorrow. Hence the present force of the counsel with which each message concludes:

“He that hath ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the ecclesias.”

Taken from: - “Seasons of Comfort” Vol. 2

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