

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 156

In our readings this morning, we have had exhibited to us two pictures apparently as disconnected as they are dissimilar, and yet we shall find them to be parts of a glorious whole. They will each repay separate consideration, and will conjointly yield to us a large measure of that spiritual comfort and strength which constitute true edification.

We have, first, had a vision of the land of Palestine divided in symmetrical portions among the tribes of Israel, with the temple of God in the midst; and we have, secondly, looked at a small company of sorrowful men in an obscure upper room, listening to one of them whose words made their hearts sad, though containing so much to fill them with comfort and joy. The one picture belongs to the future; and the other to the past; yet they both belong to one another. The centre of the one picture is the centre of the other; and the one leads to the other. The Son of Man in the day of his sufferings lays the foundation for the Son of Man in the day of his glory. The glory has come first in the order of reading, and we will take it in this order as the best means of giving us strength to endure the day of suffering which is not yet over.

What a beautiful prospect then is this that lies before us in Ezekiel's vision of the land of promise settled and established as God has promised by all the prophets. It is the prospect that has been before the minds of all the saints of God from the beginning, though the details were only revealed well on in the ages. Abraham the father of the faithful, saw it "*afar off*" (Hebrews 11:13; John 8:56). He "*looked for a city having foundations.*" He desired "*a heavenly country.*" It was the attractions that such a city and country had for him that led him to remain a steadfast pilgrim among strangers in the land of promise, instead of returning to his friends and native country of Chaldea. So Paul tells us in Hebrews 11; and so it must have been: for a man does not, without a reason, subject himself to social isolation and disadvantage. We have been emancipated from the delusion that supposes Abraham's expectation was fixed on regions beyond the stars. We have come to see that the place of his pilgrimage—the place where he sojourned . . . "*as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise*"—was "*the place which he should afterwards receive for an inheritance.*" (Hebrews 11:8). This place was the land of Canaan and adjacent countries. These countries are now lying in a state of desolation, and as things now are, they are among the most insignificant spots on the face of the earth. This causes those who have no knowledge or faith in the promises to have a difficulty in seeing any connection between the possession of these countries, and Abraham's desire for "*an heavenly country,*" "*a city having foundations.*" All difficulty on this head disappears when the matter is understood, as this vision of Ezekiel helps us to understand it. We can see how the land of promise, wherein the fathers sojourned as strangers, will yet become "*an heavenly country,*" and "*a city having foundations.*"

For what is it we see in the abundant and sure word of prophecy? Jerusalem, the throne of the Lord (Jer. 3:17): —a city of righteousness and faithfulness (Isaiah 1:26): a quiet habitation, a tabernacle, that shall not be taken down (33:20): the fountain of holiness (Zech. 14:20-21; Joel 3:17): gladdened and illuminated by the everlasting presence of God in Christ (Ezek. 48:35; Micah 4:7, 5:2-5): where shall be spread for all nations, a feast of fat things, tears wiped from all faces, and death itself swallowed up in victory (Isaiah 25:6-8).

To this, the joyful nations round,
All tribes and tongues, shall flow.

And what is the state of the land, in these happy days? Whereas, it is now waste and desolate, and no man thinks it worth a serious thought, it is to be fertilised, and regenerated, and repopled, so that men will exclaim at the change:

"This land that was desolate, is become like the garden of Eden" (Ezek. 36:35).

It will again become the glory of all lands. God, who has brought the desolation, in retribution for Israel's sins, declares to all the earth, that He will bring about this change.

I will "*beautify the place of my sanctuary: I will make the place of my feet glorious.*" . . . *Whereas, thou hast been forsaken and hated, so that no man went through thee. I will make thee an eternal excellency, the joy of many generations.* . . . *Violence shall*

no more be heard in thy land; wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but they shall call thy walls salvation, and thy gates praise” (Psalm 60:13-15,18).

The law for men, we are informed, will then go forth from this centre of glory, and power and beauty—wherein will be established the throne of the Lord.

“The isles shall wait for his law” (Isa. 42:4).

The nations will say,

“He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths” (Micah 4:2).

The people of the land will be all righteous (Isa. 60:21). All will know and serve God, from the least to the greatest (Jer. 31:33-34).

This is the coming state of blessedness of which Ezekiel gives us the literal frame work. He shows us the land divided among the tribes in parallel portions as it has never before been divided. He shows us a portion entirely consecrated to divine use, as no portion of the land ever has been consecrated in the history of the past. Within the boundaries of this portion (a noble expanse of country, containing, with the Prince’s appanage, east and west, many thousands of square miles), we see in its southern section, earth’s new metropolis, YAHWEH-SHAMMAH, a city exceeding the dimensions of modern London, and eclipsing it in the symmetry and grandeur of its arrangements; and in its northern section, on the site of Moriah and Calvary, we see the TEMPLE of the Lord for earth’s universal worship, a structure exceeding in size, beauty and convenience, all buildings ever built or conceived by man, giving a new, noble and gladsome significance to David’s yearnings to *“dwell in the House of the Lord for ever.”* In connection with all these things, this establishment of glory to God and love to man, we must remember the promised accessories of forest, field, and flower, and the perfection of atmospheric conditions—the prevalence of beauty in every form and salubrity in every condition—the total absence of the sterilities and glooms of earth and air which form part of the afflicted experience of the present state of things upon earth—the presence of light and comfort and efficiency in every human soul—rejoicing in hill and dale clothed with beauty, the air laden with sunshine, fragrance and song, and life a perpetual feast.

And when we have realised the gorgeous picture, we have to remember as the crowning glory of it, that it is everlasting—that there is no law of decay among the glorified Sons of Abraham: that they have been made immortal: that they are incorruptible in nature: and godlike in faculty: and that as the years roll on, though changes will, for a thousand years at least, come to the mortal nations over whom they reign, and sin and death in mild degree mar the joy of mankind, the blessedness of the saints will know no abatement: their years, no change or end.

In view of this coming glory (promised to Abraham and his seed for ever, and made sure by the death and resurrection of the Lord, which we meet this morning to celebrate)—a glory that is no dream of poetry or fantasy of wild imagination—*“no cunningly devised fable”*—but the sober, promised, covenanted, guaranteed, certified, and illustrated goodness of God, who made heaven and earth, and to whom nothing is impossible, —I say, in view of the nature of the glory promised to Abraham and his seed, it is not difficult, but easy, for us to understand how Abraham should associate with it the expectation of a *“heavenly country,”* and a *“city having foundations.”* Palestine, with the condition of things shown and promised in all the prophets, will be *“a heavenly country.”* There is no heavenliness of country anywhere upon earth at present. The most favoured countries are made hideous by human unrighteousness and unmercifulness; disfigured by human poverty and abortion; afflicted with human suffering of all kinds. The very beauties of civilisation are but as the gaudy and baleful flowers that grow in a morass: they give out an infragrant odour, and underneath them all is the bottomless ooze of dark and hideous human life.

And the finest polity (city) the earth has ever seen is without foundations. Everything is on the move like the shifting sand. *“A world of change”* is the proverbial description of it. Men grow, and wither, and die, like the flowers. All glory fades and joy perishes with the advance of life which at present means the advance of life which at present means the advance of decay. There is no stability: there are no foundations. Contrast with this the state of things promised to Abraham. It is a city having foundations. God is the foundation of it, and He is everlasting. Every man entering therein will be a partaker of the divine nature, and a sharer of the divine fullness of life and power for evermore.

“There shall be no more curse.”

Every saint will be a delightful friend for ever to all his fellow saints, without flaw or tarnish, and without horizon to life or glory. And the glory will stretch away, in its bearings, into the infinitude of

immensity; for the universe belongs to the one Father, and His family has many branches, embracing the multitude of the heavenly host, of whom a small detachment chanted on the plains of Bethlehem the glories of God's purpose for the earth in Christ when the babe was born who was "*Christ the Lord.*"

It requires no particular ingenuity to connect these things (embraced in our Ezekiel reading) with the discourse read to us from John. The speaker of the discourse was he of whom it will then be said, "*He is the King of Glory.*" It was then the day of his humiliation, and the hour of his deepest sorrow. With a few disciples, he was partaking of the Passover feast for the last time, in prospect of the shame and the sufferings of the morrow; and he spoke words which are of precious import to us, while the glory is yet in abeyance, and the time of the sufferings of Christ (in his brethren) is not yet at an end. They help us to realise our true position in the world, and in the present time. He says,

"I am the vine: ye are the branches."

It is a figure of speech, but a powerful one, to convey what he wished them to recognise, viz.:

"Without me ye can do nothing."

What a world of truth there is in this that men universally fail to recognise. We have come to see and embrace and rejoice in it. Apart from Christ, no object of life, of any lasting consequence, can be accomplished. Many results are accomplished by human effort: individual wealth, public commerce, political influence, literary fame. But what does it avail for the ages that are ceaselessly rushing on? The home of the dead—the common cemetery and the stately mausoleum—alike tell the story, "*All is vanity.*" Nothing comes from it. Apart from Christ, life is a failure, and futurity a vacuum—without him we can do nothing.

Most men think otherwise. By morality they think they can do something, though their morality is of such poor condition. By respectability, by propriety, by human favour, by wealth, they tacitly assume a place may be secured in the ages, if there be such a place (although on this point, most of them are entirely uncertain and some distinctly sceptical). God forbid that we should even seem to disparage morality, propriety, or true respectability; but that these things can save the sons of Adam none can believe who believes in the word of God. This word reveals to us both the present actual condition and position of man before God, with whom only futurity lies, and the way of acceptance with him: and in the presence of this revelation, the universal trust in moderate good behaviour, and the universal indifference to God's will, and way in Christ appear absolute insanity. It is as if men should hope for a crop by scattering their grain on turnpike roads or throwing it into the sea.

We are happy in having come to recognise what God has appointed. It hath pleased Him to require the belief of the glad tidings of His own good purpose in Christ, faith in His vindicated righteousness by the death of Christ, submission to His resurrected Son, and the obedience of the commandments delivered by Him. Apart from these requirements, which human wisdom may scorn, but cannot set aside, we cannot please God. Without Christ we can do nothing. How reasonable, then, and powerful, is the exhortation before us in the chapter,

"Abide in me and I in you" (John 15:4).

His meaning is clear though veiled in figure. The figure he derives from the connection of a branch with a tree. The branch depends for its growth upon its connection with the tree. If disconnected it withers. Connection with Christ is the thing he inculcates. If a man is not connected with Christ, he has no vitality for the ages, whatever he may be in himself.

But what is the nature of the connection? A beginning is made when the gospel is believed, and the name of Christ is assumed in baptism. But this is not enough; it is the connection to be continued after then that Jesus has in view in the words in question: and it is this that is important for us to consider. How continue the connection—how lose it; this is the point. He makes it plain.

He says let "**MY WORDS** abide in you."

Or as Paul expresses it,

*"Let Christ dwell in your heart **by faith**"* (Eph. 3:17);

Or again,

*"Let the **word of Christ** dwell in you richly"* (Col. 3:16).

A man who thus lets Christ dwell in him, dwells in Christ: for a man, in a moral sense, is in that which is in him.

Now, how is a man to let the words of Christ dwell in him, and dwell richly? This presupposes that the words of Christ are accessible. And so they are; and our wisdom lies in recognising them. Many words are said to be the words of God and Christ which are only the words of man. There is a great difference between the words of God and the words of man. The words of God are not to be found in a man's heart, nor on the earth, nor in the sea, nor among the stars. They are to be found where God has written them, and there only. He spoke to Israel by the prophets and by His Son. He is not speaking now. A time of silence has set in of design. But the words He spoke before have been written under His own supervision, and by a marvellous Providence they have been preserved amid the confusions of many ages. They are in our hands now. They are in the Bible; and they are nowhere else, except in so far as they have been got from the Bible. Let us realise this point very clearly. If a man expect to get God's words and God's thoughts in Shakespeare or Tennyson, or any other of the world's popular prophets, he will be grievously disappointed, or, still worse, he will be fatally deceived. Under the power of this deception, he may saturate his faculties with this world's thought, which, while sweet to his taste, will poison the springs of his mind towards God, and gradually bring him into a state in which, instead of "*imagination and every high thought*" having been "*brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ,*" any little fealty he owed to Christ at the beginning will have been killed within by the imbibed nectar of the wisdom of the world, which is foolishness with God. Where will be the maxims and speculations and dogmatisms of the schools when Christ is in the earth and the thunders of his judgment strike terror to the ends of the earth? The glory of literary "polish" and "cultured" thought will shine with a sickly light in the presence of the glory of God revealed. No; it remains true today what Paul laid down as the necessity of true wisdom in his day:

"If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise"—

Not, God forbid, that we plead for the boor or the brute. Knowledge and culture and wisdom are beautiful in themselves. But when, allied with the spirit of pride, they are arrayed against the wisdom of God in the gospel of Christ; —when they presume to depose Divine speech from the seat of authority, or what is of equal presumption, to instal human imagination to a coordinate dignity and importance with it, they then become a dangerous adversary to be resisted to the death.

Yes, the words of Christ are in the world, and they are accessible. They are in the Bible; they are not in any man's heart or head, except as they have been deposited there from the Bible. Being in the Bible, the way to be filled with the words of Christ and to let his words abide in us, is to obtain them and constantly store them in from that source. Daily, methodical, studious, intelligent, and appreciative reading of the Bible will cause the indwelling of the word of Christ, and this will fit us for his use and fellowship; and this, in its turn, will secure for us an inheritance in the city having foundations, whose builder and maker is God, viz., the commonwealth of Israel, established in the land of promise, with glory, honour, and immortality, when the delay, and darkness, and tears, and death of this present evil world will have served their purpose, and given place to the unclouded and everlasting day of Christ.

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