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Oxen Pulpit.

Threshing and its Results.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Paul's Church, Sabbath morning, Frederickton, Sept. 23th, 1888.
"O my threshing, and the corn of my floor!"—I S. XXI. 10.

The thought here is the work and its results, and the prophet's feeling seems to be that of disappointment rather than that of joy and a sense of satisfaction and triumph, disappointment alike with the work and its results. "O my threshing, and the corn of my floor!"

He had been called to the work when the nation had seen its best days and had begun to slope to its downfall, and the special work he had been called to do as a prophet of the Lord was upon the whole discouraging, a struggle against the downward tendencies of the time. If you will turn back to the sixth chapter of his prophecies, you will find there a striking account of his call. He was then a young man wanting to know perhaps what there was for him to do, a young man of brilliant promise and high hopes. He was in the temple at Jerusalem worshipping. That is where a young man should be when he wants to know what there is for him to do. While there the youthful Isaiah had a vision of God. He saw, or thought he saw, the Lord on a throne with attendant angels and great glory, and he heard words that struck terror into his soul, and made him feel as he had never felt before what a sinner he was. "Then said I, woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." But he was not left to his despair. There is hope for the sinner at the feet of God. A seraph flew, or seemed to fly, having in his hands a live coal he had taken with the tongs from off the altar, and with the live coal he touched the prophet's unclean lips, and gave him to understand that he was pardoned, consecrated. Then he heard it asked who would go to the work, and he offered his services and was accepted. And this was the commission given him to work out, and a hard one it was: "Go and tell these people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn again, and be healed." That was indeed a hard outlook for the young prophet, one that might well make him shrink from the undertaking. Can we wonder that he was troubled, and wanted to know how long this hopeless state of affairs with the nation would last? "Then said I, Lord, how long?" And he was told it would last till the cities were emptied of their populations, and the land had become a howling waste. Of course a little hope was held out, a beyond of joy was promised. Still, what a threshing his was, and then when the threshing was over, what an empty floor, how little to show for his work.

Now, Isaiah has been at work for some time. Years of toil have passed over him, and as he contemplates what he has done, or tried to do and be, and comes to take account of the measure of success he has had in the work, or rather the no-success, he cries out with a sore heart in the words of my text: "O my threshing and the corn of my floor!"

In further illustrating and applying the striking and suggestive text, we have here, first, what the work is. And it is aptly called a threshing.

We all know what threshing is. It is the process by which the grain is separated from the straw. And it would appear that in Isaiah's time as well as in our day it was done in different ways. The simplest way was, and still is, by beating the sheaves with a stick or flail. Then it was often done by driving oxen backwards and forwards over the sheaves, the trampling of their feet affecting the process, and the Lord made a law to the effect that the ox as he trode out the grain was not to be muzzled. And then it was done also by dragging over the sheaves a roller with teeth. This seems to have been a new invention in Isaiah's time from what he says about it. "Behold I will make thee a new threshing instrument having teeth; thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small." We have further improved upon this toothed threshing instrument by driving it with horse-power or steam.

Now, the prophet's work of old, and the preacher's work of to-day, is a sort of threshing. Let us follow out, if we can, the analogy between the two processes of threshing grain and preaching the gospel, and we will find, I think, truths and lessons that will be both interesting and instructive, that may clear some things that are not as clear to us as they should be.

And threshing is a necessity. You never find grain in its native state as pure grain, grain without straw and chaff, grain so that without any

further trouble you can go and fill up your sacks. You do not find wheat that way, nor oats, nor barley, nor buckwheat, nor any other kind of grain. Our grain comes to us as straw and grain together, and more or less closely attached, so closely attached sometimes that it is quite a serious task to separate them. We sometimes ask in our questioning way, for we think it is very clever to ask questions, why we do not have, and cannot have, the pure grain, the grain without the straw, so that we would not need to thresh any. And I do not know how it is, but I have not the least doubt whatever that the way things are, is the wisest and very best way for them to be. Perhaps the Lord saw it would not do that we have things made ready to our hand too much. And then straw has its uses as well as the grain. And then it makes it easier to gather the grain with the straw than without. At all events we have grain and straw together, and sometimes hard and fast together, and that being the case the threshing process is a necessity. The grain buried up in the straw is, comparatively speaking, lost; it is no good unless we can get it out of the straw. The best of wheat may be there, but wheat and straw together we cannot make bread of with which to feed our families.

And the threshing of preaching is a necessity too. We do not find the golden wheat of God's kingdom made ready to our hand. We find the wheat of the church and the straw of the world very much mingled, so mingled that we are not sure indeed whether there is any wheat at all. We wonder perhaps why it could not be otherwise; we wonder why we could not have churches all made ready to our hand in a natural sort of way. But somehow things are not that way either with grain or men, and that is about all the reason we can give for their not being so. Look at society as it is with us, and what an admixture it is, a mass of you do not know what, certainly indeed of not much that is good. And then look at the world as it is in its native state. Some of the wise men of our time want us to believe that our isms, our creeds and churches, our so-called civilization and education and such like, have been doing the world more harm than good. The world in its native state is well enough; let it alone. But our missionaries who have gone out to where the world is in its native state, to the raw heathenism, tell us that the state of matters, socially, morally, spiritually, and in every other respect, is about as bad as it can be. It is with the world morally and spiritually in its native state very much as it is with wheat in its native state—wheat and straw together, the wheat buried up and lost to any practical utility in the straw. There is a necessity, then, urgent claimant necessity, for the threshing of the gospel, if the wheat of the kingdom here or yonder would be saved from the straw and rubbish of the world around it.

Then again, threshing is noisy disagreeable work. It is work that has to be done if there is to be any good, any wheat, any bread; but it is work that no one likes. It makes the dust fly. It fills the barn-floor with confusion and disorder. Set two strong young farmers to work with the old-fashioned flail, or four of them, to thresh, and what a din and dust they make, and how soon the orderly wheat-sheaves are beaten into a shapeless heap of straw. You come in where they are at work, and you find things in a terrible stew perhaps. It looks as if there could never be order again on your barn floor, and it looks to us as if all the brilliant prospects of your wheat crop are to be utterly beaten out of it in the threshing. You say: "Boys, what does all this mean? Can you not take it easy, and do it neatly? O pity the wheat; you will ruin things!" But they belabor away harder than ever, and laugh at the idea of taking it easy in threshing. The more the dust flies, the more the straw is tossed and troubled, the more the wheat-sheaves are beaten out of shape, the more hope that the results will be satisfactory.

Now, the preacher who would be successful in winning souls must be a thrasher. He must know how to wield the word-flail with unsparing effectiveness. He must cry aloud, and spare not, in the language of Isaiah. There will be loud complaints, harsh criticisms. People do not like to have it laid on too heavy. They do not take it kindly to have their way of doing things and the life they are living rudely knocked about to see what of good there is in them. They come up to the House of God Sabbath morning from a week of careless ease and indulgence, and they are in a pleasant mood, in a happy state of composure. They sit down in their pew, and they want to have a sweet quiet time, nothing to ruffle the serenity of their soul, nothing to disturb their peace. But the preacher is a thrasher. He is armed with a flail, and he swings it right and left, and seems to care not whom he hits or how hard he hits. The dust flies. There is restlessness in the pews, uneasiness, a shifting from side to side as if the pews were not as comfortable as usual. The husband looks at his wife, and the wife looks back at him, and citizens look at one another,

and the looks are a puzzle and a study. But the threshing goes on, and some of the straw flies out of the door perhaps, and it looks serious and threatening all over the church.

One quiet Sabbath morning in the long ago, the people of a certain village, since famous, repaired, as they were wont, to their meeting-place to worship, and as they greeted one another at the church door and across the aisle they were pleased and happy. A young man was in their pulpit that Sabbath morning, one of themselves, a real thrasher. He began in a mild tone of voice, and he spoke with an ease and eloquence that were pleasant to listen to. But as he warmed to his work, his eye began to flash fire, and the blows of his words fell thick and hard. The people grew restless and impatient. They hustled uncomfortably in their seats. They did not like to hear that young man, who knew all about the way they lived their lives, and how hollow were their religious profession, let out on them the way he was doing. Every word from his lips was the truth, but they did not like it any the better for that. It was not the truth they wanted to hear—those hearers. So they looked at one another, and then at the preacher, with their black looks, and they whispered ominously. The thrasher, however, kept right on with his vigorous truth-telling, until at last the people could stand it no longer, and they leaped up and tried to mob him. But they were not able to effect their mad purpose. That preacher was Jesus, and the village where it occurred was Nazareth.

You tell me sometimes not to be so hard with you. You say, it does no good to come down on your drunkenness, your worldliness, your follies. You might as well spare your breath. It only exasperates. It drives people away, alienates them from the church. Ah! the thing that troubles me is, that I spare you too much, that I am too gentle with you, that I am not half as hard as Jesus would be were He here in my place. How He would stir up things among us, as He did in Nazareth in the long ago, if He would preach to us! And I am to preach as He would preach. I am to cry out against this wretched ease of ours. I am to give you no rest in your sins. Let your drunkenness alone! Let that dark river of pollution flow along our streets, and say nothing against it! I would be recreant to my trust and unworthy to be where I am if I should do so. It is not pleasant to thresh. It is often bitter work. But, for all that, it is work that must be done, if there is to be any good, and, because of the good, I should be glad to do it. I am beginning to feel that I have not been doing enough of it of late, and so I have brought my flail to-day to have a half-hour's threshing, and God grant that the rude stern work may not be in vain.

Still another thing about threshing, it is a work of separation. It is to separate the grain from the straw. All the season the grain and straw had been growing and ripening together on the hill-side, and they clung to one another with a fond embrace. The harvest-time came, and the reapers with their sickles cut them down. Or perhaps the modern reaper was used, and soon the acres of standing grain were sheaves. Still, the grain and straw held together; they refused to be sundered. Then came the day when the sheaves were carted to the barn and mowed away. And still the grain and straw held to one another and lay down to sleep together, as if they would never be called upon to part. But they must be separated, and the day of separation came at last. Unusual stir was heard on the barn-floor, and it was known and felt that something was going on. The threshers had come with their flails, and the sheaves were unbound, and laid on their backs, and sore beaten. Or, they were thrown into the voracious jaws of the modern threshing-machine, which, with infinite clatter and cruelty, soon tore straw and grain asunder never to be together again. The separation was hard; still it had to be. It took many cruel blows to effect it, but there was no salvation for the wheat without the separation, and the threshing was necessary to the separation.

So also here. The preaching of the gospel must have a separating effect, if any real good is to be done. Our Lord said in strong words: "Think not that I came to send peace on the earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law; and a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he that doth not take his cross and follow after me, is not worthy of me." Thus, in a very rugged sort of way, the Master shews us the necessity there is for separation.

And the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthian Christians impresses upon them the duty of separation: "Wherefore come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be to you a father, and ye shall be to me sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."

As the gospel finds us, we are in certain relationships. We are members of families. We are in society. We are in business. We have our companionships. We have our ideas of things, our views and opinions. We are living in sin. We have evil habits that we indulge in, and we are more or less fettered by them. The world has us in its coils. We are the devil's slaves. And perhaps we are very well satisfied to be as we are. We want to be let alone in our wretched world-relationships. We have our ideas of things, and our way of living, and we are bound to hold on to them. We think they are all right, and we would not part with them for anything. And thus we are.

Now, the only hope for us is to break up these old world-relationships, to disentangle us from the worthless straw of society, to sunder us from our evil companionships, to tear us from the deadly fascinations of sin, to change, in a word, the whole tenor of our lives. And this is what the gospel proposes to do, and so it puts us through the threshing process by which it would separate us from what we have been. It is a hard process, and sometimes a long and tedious one, but if it is persisted in, it is usually successful.

You think, some of you, that you are good enough as you are and where you are. "Joining the church," you say, "what is that going to do for me? I do not believe in it, and I am not going to join any church. It is bigotry to tie myself up to a church, and I am too liberal in my ideas, too broad in my views and opinions, to be a member of a church. If I cannot be a Christian where I am, I cannot be a Christian in the church. And so I want to be let alone, for I am well enough as I am and where I am. This being preached to, and hustled about and turned over, I do not like, and it is of no use, and does no good."

Ah! my hearer, does the farmer yonder let the wheat and the straw continue together? No; he wants to know which is wheat and which straw. There is a difference. You think you are good enough where you are and as you are. Good enough for what? Good enough—for straw. The wheat that persists in holding to the straw after it is threshed and threshed, is not wheat; it is counted as straw. And are you satisfied to be the straw of the world, and that is what you are where you are and as you are, I confess I am not satisfied to have you straw, and so I keep at you, and I am going to keep at you. For I feel sure that something better can be made of you than straw. Some farmers feed their cattle with straw, and poor feed it is. Others burn it to get it out of the way, or convert it into manure. Oh, my hearer, it is awful to be straw and stubble here and to be straw and stubble everlastingly, to be on the left hand here and to be on the left hand yonder! God will burn the straw and the chaff, but the wheat He will gather and save. "O my threshing and the corn of my floor!"

Again, the results of the threshing of the corn of the floor. After threshing, for a while, the thrasher puts the straw aside, and finds out, if he can, what there is of grain for him. And sometimes it is hard threshing, and most meagre and unsatisfactory returns. The grain that is hardest to thresh often yields the meaneast results. The grain is small in quantity and poor in quality.

I am very much afraid that when the farmers this year come to thresh their grain, they will find, that, what with the frost and the wet weather, their threshing will come sadly short. After a hard day's work threshing, when they come to clear up, they may be heard bitterly bewailing their disappointment thus: "O my threshing and the corn of my floor!"

Now, I have been threshing away as I can, perhaps not upon the most improved methods, the wisest and best way of doing the work. There is always room for improvement: there is always a good, better, best way of doing everything. And far be it from me to say that I do my work as it might be done. I want to do the best I can, but I am aware that I come far short. Still, I have been at work threshing away. And now the time has come round again when we are to gather in the results, and see what of wheat we have and what of straw. People will say to me sometimes, strangers from round about: "You have a fine congregation." And I say, "Yes!" And yet, when we divide up, and get the wheat together by itself, and the straw by itself, there is so much straw and so little wheat that my heart cries out with soreness and disappointment: "O my threshing and the corn of my floor!"

I have been inviting you to come and take your place with us in the church, in the work there is to do, in the good there is to enjoy, and so few seem to want to come this time, fewer than usual. I say to myself: "How is it? Is it my fault?" And I have always felt that if the results were meagre and unsatisfactory, it was in some measure my fault. O how sad it is to thresh and thresh, and no wheat on the floor! Is that to be my experience as it was the prophet's?

And this concerns you as well as me. What are you, my hearer, wheat or straw? When we come to gather together in our poor imperfect way the