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Our Pulpit.

The Word Behind The Right Way

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT

In St. Paul's Church, Fredericton Sunday morning Nov. 25th 1888.

"And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee saying: This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left."—ISAIAH XXX. 21.

Our life is a journey, a solemn one. It has been called a funeral march, a march to the grave. Many make light of it. They trip along through it gayly, thoughtlessly. They sing and dance as they live. But for all that, it is solemn, earnest, awful, real. It is beset with dangers, perils, woes; and the long long results are momentous, tremendous. He runs a great risk who takes this journey, and yet we have to take it. We have no choice in the matter. Our wishes are never consulted. It was said of one by Him who knows all about life: "It had been good for that man if he had not been born," so poor a use did he put his life to. And alas! the same thing may be said of us. Still, we have been born, and now we must live, and make the best of it. We cannot now go back to the womb of nothingness, and cease to be. We cannot say, "I will not live." We must set ourselves to this toilsome, perilous journey that we wake up to find ourselves on, and we must go through with it, however it may issue with us, whether in glory or woe.

And the text shows us, I think, that although we have to take the journey of life whether we will or not, and although there are great risks in taking it, yet no one need make an utter failure, or go seriously astray. There are, it is true, innumerable by-ways, and cross-roads, and break-neck paths, and broad-ways; but there is at least one right way, and there is a true voice to guide us in that right way, and no man need live his life in vain. If a man goes to destruction in making the journey of life, he has himself to blame for it. He did not hear and heed the word behind that would have guided him safely past all the by-ways and cross-roads of error and ruin along the right way. "And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left."

Now, first, let us enquire what this word is, that, like a friend behind us, calls to us when we are about to turn aside from the right way, and directs us where to go.

And there is much difference of opinion among exegetes as to what the voice is. The Septuagint version makes it out to be the voice of error, the word of seducers, telling men that a way is right when it is not right. But the general opinion is, that the voice behind is a true guide, not a deceiver.

The Rabbins called the voice behind the Bath Kol, or the daughter of a voice, that is, an echo. They held that a mysterious voice may be heard echoing within one, telling one the deep things of God, revealing the mysteries of life, the future, and so on. It corresponds to what men sometimes speak of as their impressions, premonitions, forewarnings, forebodings, and so on. But the Bath-Kol is a too dreamy and vague sort of thing to be a safe guide of life. It may say one thing to-day and something else to-morrow. A man feels persuaded perhaps, strongly and inexplicably influenced and drawn, to take a certain course, to act in a certain way, and he does it because he is thus persuaded, drawn, influenced, and finds, it may be, he has done wisely for himself, made money, succeeded in the best sense. And thus he goes on, letting himself be led by he knows not what, till he knows not where he is, either in business or religion. Ah! it does not do to listen to every voice that comes to one. The bath-kol we like to hear is the echo of our own wishes, our own wilful will, our own headlong-rushing ambition, our mad reckless impulses and passions.

Then others think that every one has a good angel following him all through life; indeed, not only a good angel, but also an evil one. There are certain obscure passages in the word of God that seem to favor the idea. Angels conducted Lot and his wife and daughters out of Sodom. An angel led Peter out of the prison. And a multitude of similar references. Then our Lord speaks of the angels of children beholding the face of His Father in Heaven. The idea is something like this. An angel is assigned every child at birth, whose duty is to watch over it. Unseen the heavenly messenger sits by its cradle-bed, and watches with sleepless watchfulness for its good, guarding it from harm, caring for it with a tender care. Then when it begins to run round, and learn to climb, the good angel follows it everywhere, and mysteriously leads it past many a danger, and breaks many a fall. And then later on, when the child is a young man or young woman, the good angel is near to whisper softly in the

ear of the soul, telling them to do this that is right, and not to do that that is wrong, to be careful when danger is near and temptation lurks, and sometimes the good guardian angel is not heeded nor wanted, and has to reluctantly relinquish to his or her fate the foolish wayward one. And then the evil angel has his will, and ruin soon follows. Now, according to some, the voice behind is the good angel's voice, his earnest whisperings in the evil hour, prompting us to do right when we are tempted to do wrong.

Man hath two attendant angels,
Ever waiting at his side,
With him wheresoe'er he wanders,
Wheresoe'er his feet abide.
One to warn him when he darkleth,
And rebuke him if he stray;
One to leave him to his nature,
And so let him go his way.

The word referred to, with others again, is an enlightened conscience. Conscience is sometimes called the moral sense. As we see with the sense of sight, feel with the sense of touch, taste with the sense of taste; so the conscience is that sense by which we see, feel, taste, know, oughtness, rightness, wrongness. It is the soul's sense.

A conscientious man is a man who is true to his convictions. What he believes to be the right thing for him to do, he will do. He wants to do right, and he aims to do right, in everything he does, and just for the right's sake, and he is extremely sensitive on all matters of conscience. If he pursues a certain course from conscientious convictions, you cannot easily drive him or draw him from it. He will stubbornly hold on his way, although mountains of difficulties and dangers tower up before him. With the firm conviction that he is doing right and serving his God, he will dare fire and sword, anything at all, and go straight forward to the fulfilment of his grand purpose.

Such a man is a true moral hero. We respect him, honor him, fear him. But he is not always right. Sometimes he is terribly wrong, and doing wrong with all the might of a great earnest conscientious soul. Because a man is conscientious, that is no evidence he is right. He is as likely to be wrong as right, so far as his conscience is concerned.

Paul, when he was Saul, was as conscientious as a man could be, when he was ravaging the christian church, martyring her Stephens. He thought he was right. He was sure he was glorifying God, and doing just what he ought to do. He was in earnest, terribly so, and he was thoroughly honest in his intentions. There was no vacillation about him, no questioning or doubting in his mind as to whether he was right or not. He was iron principle through and through, and he was so sure he heard the voice of God saying to him: "Young man, this is the way, walk in it—the way to Damascus, the way over the ruin of the christian church!" But he was mistaken. His conscientious convictions turned out to be national prejudice, Jewish bigotry, blind zeal, mad ambition, cruel intolerance, the devil's inspiration. He was doing the devil's work, fighting against God, kicking against the prick, throwing his life away doing the impossible.

And there are men today of this stamp. They are conscientious in their way of it, and because they are so they think their ideas and opinions should be accepted without a question's being raised as to their soundness. Some of them are men of iron principles, strong stubborn will. They would go to the stake rather than yield up an iota of what they hold to be the truth. They have an idea in their head and heart as to what they should do, and that idea is like a voice from Heaven to them, an inspiration, and they go on their way, ravaging the church, sowing discord among the people, destroying souls, and doing the devil's work, and thinking all the time they are glorifying God.

Thus, conscience, which is God's voice in men's souls to guide them in the right way, cannot always be relied on as a safe guide, by reason of the blinding effects of sin. Because you are conscientious, my brother, that is no reason why you should hold the opinions you hold, and why you should follow out the course of life you are following out. Your conscience may be in the dark. It may be unenlightened by the Spirit of God. Perhaps you do not think you can be wrong in a matter you are so much in earnest about. But no one wants to think he is wrong, and conscientious people are about the hardest people to convince they are wrong. Saul of Tarsus could not think he was wrong. The disciple of Gamaliel wrong! Impossible! But it turned out he was wrong. And we are all wrong, more or less. We have not yet got hold of all the truth. Our conscience needs the enlightening of God's Spirit and the teaching of God's word.

Now, it is the enlightened conscience that is the voice behind. In the deep soul God speaks. The voice of conscience is His voice, and so far as it is His voice it is perfectly reliable. But, then, that still small voice within is not always distinctly heard. The feelings, desires, passions, appetites, have voices too loud vociferous voices, and it is not

always easy making out the still small voice from the rest of the voices that mingle with it and sometimes all but drown it. There is a vast difference between the still small voice and the voices of the passions, just as much of a difference as there is between the songs of angels and the discordant music of earth, and we ought to be able to discriminate between them.

But somehow we do not. We are not careful to listen attentively. We do not always want to hear the voice of God, for it is not always pleasant to do what His voice tells us to do, and to go where His voice wants us to go. We rush recklessly where we should pick our steps and choose our ways, and we stop our ears sometimes that we may not hear at all. But we do hear. We know that God is speaking to us in the conscience, and telling us what to do and what not to do, where to go and where not to go.

And then, to enable us to understand still more clearly and unmistakably what the voice behind is saying, God has given us His written Word. That word of His, and the word behind, should agree, so that we are not left in the dark as to what we should do, and where we should go, in the perplexing ways of life. If we are in the dark, and go astray, and do wrong, it is because we do not care to hear and heed the voice behind.

Again, we have here the right way along which the voice behind guides men. "This is the way; walk ye in it." That way is the way of salvation, the great highway of life and destiny. It is every man's supreme life-business to be saved. There should be through a man's territory of activity and life a grand trunk way leading straight on to glory, a way that there can be no mistaking as to what it is and where it goes, and that way should be the way of salvation, a lane of light across the dark sea of life that the angels come and go on.

A traveller knows a highway from a by-way when he comes to it—I mean, of course, a traveller of some experience. From its breadth and straightness and levelness, from the substantial character of the way itself, from the number and variety of the tracks along it, and from the amount of business done on it, he knows at once that it is the great thoroughfare, and he keeps on it. He says to himself, yea the voice behind says to him: "This is the way."

Now, through a man's life, just as through a country, there should be a great leading road, a thoroughfare, and that way should be the way of salvation. In Palestine they had but few and poor roads, but the roads leading to the different cities of refuge were the best. It was enjoined upon the nation specially to keep them in good repair, and so well marked, that there could be no mistaking them, no getting astray. Thus, the way of salvation for the manslayer was by far the best road in the country.

And the way of salvation should be and is the best way. There is no way like it. Jesus is that way, and He has provided in Himself a first-class road for His people to travel on, a royal road, a way of life and joy. He has filled up the valleys, tunnelled the mountains, bridged the rivers, cut through the tangled wilderness, gathered out the stones, and made a way there is no mistaking straight up to the foot of the throne.

There are ways that bruise the heart, blister the feet, and weary out those who travel them. But not so with this way. Those who take the way of salvation, and keep on it, renew their strength as they get along. They mount up on wings as eagles. They run and are not weary; they walk and are not faint. And so well marked is this way, so different is it from every other, that there is no need to go astray in it. "The wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein."

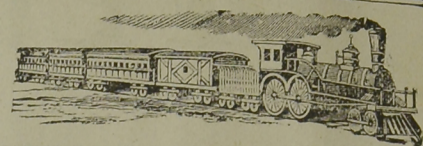
Now, God wants every one to walk in this way. He has made it, not for a particular caste nor class, but for all men. It is not a national way this, but a world's way. His voice is ringing throughout the world today in tones of great joy, saying to men everywhere: "This is the way; walk ye in it."

My hearer, have you found this glorious highway of salvation, this King's way? Are your feet on this way today? Are you walking on it with your face towards the glory to come? Have you heard the gospel voice speaking from yonder cross away behind saying: "This is the way: walk ye in it;" and are you walking in it? Not to be in the way of life is to be in the way of death, and sooner or later it will meet you, and how will you escape? Jesus says to you today: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me."

Then, beside the great Highway of salvation, there are what may be called the byways which men have to take in the way of their duty.

There for instance is the business byways which men have to take, and a very important way it is. We cannot get along through the world without doing something for a living. God wants

Continued on third page.



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12.00 M.—For Fredericton Junction St. John and points east.
3.15 P. M.—For Fredericton Junction, St. John and points East.

ARRIVE AT FREDERICTON

9.25 A. M.—From Fredericton Junction St. John and all points East.
2.30 P. M.—From Fredericton Junction, Vanceboro, Bangor, Portland, Boston, and points West, St. John St. Andrew's, St. Stephen, Houlton, Woodstock.

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