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THE WOE OF DRINK

—AND—

THE DUTY OF THE HOUR.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT

In St. Paul's Church, Fredericton,
on October 15th, 1882.

Text.—"Woe unto him that giveth his neighbour drink, that putteth thy bottle to him, and maketh him drunken also.—Habakkuk II, 15.

I am to preach to-night on the woe of drink and the duty of the hour, and I regret much that there is any necessity for my doing so. I would very much rather hold my tongue, if I could do so consistently with my position as a minister of the gospel, a preacher of the word, a teacher of the people, for it is anything but pleasant to speak on a burning question like this. But, I feel, to hold my tongue would be utterly unworthy of me and wrong. This burning question, as I regard it, concerns the interests of morality and religion, the good of society and the salvation of souls, the prosperity of the church and the redemption of the world; and, looking up to Heaven for help and guidance and inspiration, I shall speak in the name of the Lord, and it is for you to judge whether I thus speak, and to act accordingly. If I speak not as God's word teaches—if I utter not the sentiments and principles of the Bible, then I do not want you to accept them; but, on the contrary, if I say to you what the Lord would say, then it will not do to pay no attention to the matter.

Now, the Lord has something to say to men on the drink question, something to the point, something that there is no mistaking the meaning of, and it is simply for me and you to hear what He has to say. There are those who tell us that we have no right to introduce into the pulpit a question of this kind.

It is aside from our great commission. We are to preach the gospel. We are to tell men how to be saved. We are to point the perishing to the Cross. But the great burning questions that are agitating society, throbbing and pulsating in the heads and hearts of the people, we are to have nothing to do with.

And, it must be admitted, that there are preachers who so read their commission that they steer clear of all the great practical questions of life and duty. But I cannot so read mine. I have the whole counsel of God to declare. I feel that whatever affects the people—their higher interests, their happiness, their spiritual and eternal well-being, I am to speak to them on that. The prophets of old did so. The apostles did so. The Lord himself did so. And I shall do so as He may give me strength.

First then, here is a woe, the woe of drink, one of the greatest woes that have fallen upon men. It is not necessary for me to discuss at any length the woe of drink, for it is all but universally admitted that intemperance is a great evil, a terrible woe. I know those who drink do not think it a bad thing. They would not drink if they did so. They smack their lips and call it good. They will tell you how good it makes them feel, how it stimulates their flagging energies, how it heals and helps and comforts and blesses. It fires the patriot's zeal, nerves the soldier to do and dare on the battle-field, steadies the surgeon's hand as he cuts through the patient's quivering flesh, inspires the preacher as he speaks to men of judgment and mercy, makes home happy, gives flush to the cheek of youth and flash to the eye of beauty. With some men drink is the very elixir of life, the panacea for all ills, Heaven's choicest gift to men. But when I go to these sacred pages to learn what God thinks about it; to know the truth; I find a question asked and answer given. The question is, "Who hath woe?" and the answer is, "They that tarry long at the wine."

But here and there you will find one, a bold drinker, who will question the wisdom of Solomon, or rather, the wisdom of God, in a matter of this kind. He will stoutly hold that it is not woe to drink; it is bliss. What exhilaration! what rapture! But I read on: "At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder." And, go to men who have followed up the pernicious practice to the bitter end, and out of the ruin it has brought them down to they will tell you it is woe.

But to drink is not the only woe. I learn from the text that there is woe to the whole liquor-business—woe to the man who invites another to drink, woe to him who takes the flask out of his pocket and puts it to the lips of his friend, woe to him who sells for drinking purposes, woe too to the distiller and manufacturer, woe to everyone, in fact, who has anything to do with encouraging and spreading the drink-evil.

Now, some of you may think that I am too sweeping in my generalization, too far-reaching in the inference I am deducing from the text. And it may be so, but I do not think so. However, the prophets' message is here for you to make out of it what you can as well as for me. It seems clear to me, that the Lord, by the mouth of His prophet, is pronouncing a woe upon everyone who in any way helps men to drunkenness. I admit I may be inferring more than I have any right to infer, but I do not want to. The words are as strong as they can be, and no true soul—no one that fears the Lord, can feel very comfortable under them. "Woe unto him that giveth his neighbor drink, that putteth thy bottle to him, and maketh him drunken also."

I grant that there are men in the liquor-business who want to make it something else than a woe. They think it is possible to manage the business respectably, and they are trying hard to do it. But it is clearly impossible. A woe has gone out against it, and with that woe hanging over it, no good can come out of it. And those connected with it have to grant it at last. It drags them down. It surrounds them with the very refuse of society. It brings them into living contact with the vicious and immoral, the leprous and the lecherous, and for men to maintain respectability in such circumstances is a moral impossibility. And all experience goes to confirm that it cannot be done.

Oh, if my words to-night come to the ears of any in anyway connected with the business, I want to tell them with all the tenderness of one who has no interest in the world to serve but the

good of men, that the sooner they get out of it the better, for as sure as these words are here there is a woe in it. And they know it. I have talked with men in it time and again, and while they will defend themselves as well as they can, and excuse their course, they have to own up, and they do own up, that it is not good for their highest interests to be in it.

I come next to speak of the duty of the hour. The question is up before us in a practical shape how we are to suppress this evil. Of course there are two classes whose interests are in favor of the evil, those who drink themselves, and those who are in the business, and I suppose together they are quite a numerous class. But I think I am right when I say that the great body of the people look upon the evil as a sore evil, and would like to see it put down, and they want to know how it can be put down.

Now, there are but two courses open to us. Many would like prohibition out and out, but prohibition is not before us and I question if the country is yet prepared for it. I believe it will come, but in the meantime we must wait and work. The question for the citizen of Fredericton to decide on the 26th is, "Shall we retain the Scott Act or go back to the old License Law?" That is the state of the question, as I understand it, and to that state of the question I want you to look with me in the light of the text.

And if I am right in the view I have taken of the text, if the sale and manufacture of liquor for purposes of drunkenness are wrong, then it is clear to me, to go back to the old License Law is to take a wrong step. If it is wrong to sell liquor for purposes of drunkenness, then it must be wrong to license the sale of it. We are then sanctioning it, assuming a share of the responsibility of the wrong, recommending it, helping it, encouraging it. We do not even then give it a place alongside of legitimate businesses, for such businesses need no restrictions, no license to legalize them; but in licensing it, we throw around it the aegis of the law, and that gives it more or less of a character.

Of course, I admit, that even the license system is better than no system no restriction whatever. Better have a good license law than prohibition not carried out. I can conceive of a state of things in which prohibition would be an utter curse, and while I believe in prohibition, I am not prepared to say that prohibition would be the best system for Canada at the present time. I doubt if it would. But I feel persuaded that we have got beyond the old License Law. It is utterly inadequate to check the evil, much less suppress it. Many say, "Let us have a good License Law." But a good License Law you cannot have. The only reform for the monstrous evil is the reform that looks in the direction of utter suppression, out and out prohibition.

I know what the License Law is, and what it can do. For years I lived and labored side by side with the publican, and under the so-called beneficent and respectable sway of the License Law; but my experience was, that it was only evil, evil continually, a tyranny of woe. Such a law is a grand law for the publican, but a poor law for the preacher. I cannot say that I have been a great admirer of the Scott Act; but I would say, "Anything almost rather than the old License Law." Everywhere the people are rising up and asking to be delivered from it as from a great curse, and are we going back to it? Oh it cannot be!

One of the great dailies of Toronto recently discourses in one of its leaders on the question of the hour thus: "An old man snatched from the very jaws of death on a railway; a number of boys under fifteen arrested for being drunk and disorderly; the determined self-murder of an old pensioner; and the death of an infant of nine months from sheer neglect, while its inhuman mother lay near it in a state of beastly intoxication, and in the midst of a scene of filth and squalor indescribable—such are some of the records of the whiskey business given in our columns for a single day. Multiplying this showing by the number of days in the year, and the product by the number of communities of equal population throughout Ontario, we may get some definite conceptions of the wretchedness and crime which are the fruits of the traffic in strong drink in the Province. All this takes place, too, under a license system which has perceptibly reduced the evils of intemperance, and whose conditions are probably as strict and as rigidly enforced as those in any other

province or country. It is no wonder that in the face of such appalling facts increasing numbers of people are day by day becoming convinced that the times demand something better than the best license system. We do not see how any man with a heart in his bosom can get any real conception of the degradation, misery, and vice which are the direct out-come of the liquor traffic, and be longer unwilling to suffer any inconvenience or privation of luxury which the enforcement of a prohibitory law would entail. What ought an intelligent Christian people to do in such a case? Should they steel themselves to look on with indifference such a state of things? Should they fold their arms in selfish despair and say they have done their best, and there is no further help nor hope for the wretched victims? Can they, to take no higher view, as self-interested individuals, representing the society that has to suffer the evils and foot the bills for the maintenance of almshouses, asylums, and prisons, confess that they can do nothing further? Is it not about time to try some bold step, which can hardly make matters worse, in the hope that it may improve them? Who would not like to see a trial of one earnest, united, and persistent endeavor to rid the country of the cause of all the troubles by destroying the traffic, "root and branch?"

This long extract from a recent number of the Toronto Globe, I have taken to show you that the state of matters under the License System is anything but satisfactory. Many tell us that there is more drinking to-day in this city under the Scott Act than there used to be under the License System, but it must be a mistake. I have not seen boys coming home from school intoxicated as I have seen under the License System. I have not been assaulted on the public streets as I have been where the license law was in force. Bad as matters are under the Scott Act, and they are bad, I have no doubt they would be worse under the License System. We cannot go back to four years ago. During those years the liquor business has been getting worse and worse, more and more degraded, and to license it now would be to open the flood-gates of immorality upon us in a way which would be anything but good for our city.

I grant that the Scott Act has not done all for the suppression of the traffic that we had hoped. But then, it must be admitted, that it has not had a fair chance. It has had an up-hill struggle, many difficulties to contend with, many obstacles to surmount. And more than that, the evil is too deep-rooted to be eradicated in a day, or a year, or ten years, by any law, or measure whatever. A great reformation such as the temperance reformation is, of necessity requires time to work it out. There was slavery, for instance, how long it took, and what a struggle it was to effect its abolition. But now slavery is dead, all but utterly rooted out of the world, at all events driven into dark back corners. And so it will be ultimately with intemperance. It may take centuries yet of cruel wrong to open men's eyes to the enormity of the evil, but they will yet be opened to see, and then intemperance will be as much dead as slavery is to-day.

The Scott Act is not all that some of us would like it to be, not all perhaps that any of us would like it to be. It limps. But then it looks forward to something better, and we accept it for the hopefulness there seen to be in it, the promise it gives for the future. It is educative, preparatory, introductory. For my own part, I cannot say that I have much faith in legislation to deal with a question of this kind. Certainly if we depend wholly upon legislation the result will be a failure. We must depend mainly upon moral means to counteract and correct moral evils. But legislation has a place, and ought to have a place in the temperance reform, because the evil sought to be eradicated is a state evil. It is the cause of crime, which hinders the prosperity of the people, pauperizes the nation, demoralizes society, and in ten thousand ways affects the interests of the State, and the State is in the right of it to legislate with a view to the restriction and suppression.

What we have to do with here, however, is mainly the religious and moral aspects of the question. Here is a great evil that meets us everywhere, interferes with the Church's work, stands in the way of the world's redemption, debases and ruins men's souls, and it is mine and yours to consider very seriously what our duty with regard to it is. With regard to myself I have from first to last advocated total abstinence principles as best, in my judgment, in the present

state of society and the Church, with such a great evil at work destroying all around us and among us. But far be it from me to say that it is wrong to drink a glass of wine, or that it is so right, so commendable in God's sight, to abstain. "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace." We make too much to-day, I am persuaded, of eating and drinking, and of not eating and drinking. And yet we cannot ignore them; we ought not to ignore them. They have a place in Christian ethics. The same apostle who guards us against the mistake of regarding the kingdom of God as meat and drink, tells us neither to eat meat, nor drink wine, nor do anything else whereby a poor soul is hurt or destroyed. And on that ground I advocate total abstinence. On that ground I take my stand squarely here before you, and I say to you, do nothing to hurt your brother-Christian or your brother-man. Your drinking a glass of wine may ruin a child or a neighbor. Your putting the bottle to his lips not to make him drunk, but in your kindness of heart, may make him drunk and out of it may come his ruin; and, if so, I ask, how can you ever forgive yourself? There are men staggering along our streets to-night on their way to the bottomless pit, and, in their sober moments, they will tell you, it was so and so who gave them their first glass of liquor, and they accuse him of helping their ruin.

Now, which of us, standing yonder in the light of the great white throne, would like to have some one come forward there, some poor drunkard, and say: "O Christ, this minister of Thine, this elder, this church-member, taught me to drink. He took the poisoned draught from his lips, consecrated to me with his drinking from it, and held it to mine, and told me to drink it, for it would do me good. And here I am to-day among the goats, forever ruined. You call that sentiment, gush, claptrap. But the deepest instruments of men's souls will say it is true. We do not live for ourselves. We are a part of others, and we are helping or hurting them forever. Across the ages will yet be heard the awful cry of a brother's blood, a brother stricken down by our example, by our influence, and we shall have to answer for it. Oh then I entreat you to weigh very seriously your responsibility with regard to the evil.

You may not see it to be the evil as I see it. I know there are better men than I am who have no faith in the Scott Act, nor in the Temperance Reform. I am not going to say they are bad men. In their own way they are as earnest in crushing the evil as I am, but they follow out an almost diametrically opposite course. This, to say the least about it, is unfortunate, and between us the evil lives and thrives. All I can do is to hope and pray, that out of all our cross purposes, and misunderstandings, and bickerings with one another, God's glory, and men's ultimate good, may issue. I have faith in God, and I believe that the woe of drink shall yet be put down.

In conclusion, I leave the matter in your hands. It is for the people to say what the verdict shall be. I think the Scott Act should be sustained. I deprecate a retrograde movement. But it may be that that is God's way of advancing the cause. For the conquest of Canaan the defeat at Ai was the door of hope for Israel; and whether defeat or victory shall come to the temperance cause on the 26th inst. I shall feel that the cause must advance. It cannot go back any more than the truth can go back, for it is a part of the truth, and one with it.

I am more concerned, however, as to the success of the gospel among us, real religion, vital godliness, than the temperance reform, the success or the failure of the Scott Act, for it is only in this way this reform, and all other reforms, can make progress. Let the truth prevail, let the gospel have power, let religion grow, and temperance will go ahead under any law. The church and the cause of truth, I mean in the broadest sense, are not dependent on the popular vote for their success or their failure. If we should rest our success on what the people should decide, even should they decide in a way that some of us may regard as the right way, it would be a poor success, a lame success, a success that may be nothing else than a defeat. I shall be sorry if the people should say on the 26th, let us go back to the old License Law, and I hope they will not do so; but if they do so, I will not cry over it, for I have faith in God, that He will make defeats victories and victories defeats, to work out His own good and glory for the world.