



SUNDAY READING

MORNING SERVICE.

MORNING.

God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of His saints and to be had in reverence of all them that are about Him.

Let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

Through Jesus Christ we have access in one spirit unto the Father. For we have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but the spirit of children, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God.

In everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.

Collect.

O God, who givest us not only the day for labor and the night for rest, but also the peace of this blessed day, grant, we beseech Thee, that this season of holy quiet may be profitable to us in heavenly things, and refresh and strengthen us to do the work which thou hast given us to do. Amen.

HYMN.

God Our Refuge.

Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling-place in every generation:
Thy people still have known Thy grace,
And blessed Thy consolation:
Through every age Thou hearest our cry:
Through every age we found Thee nigh,
Our strength and our salvation.

Our cleaving sins we oft have wept
And oft Thy patience proved;
But still Thy patience we fast have kept,
Thy name we still have loved:
And Thou hast kept and loved us well,
Hast granted us in Thee to dwell,
Unshaken, unremoved.

Lord, nothing from Thine arm of love
Shall thine own people sever;
Our God will still remove,
Our God will still remove:
Thy people, Lord, have dwelt in Thee:
Our dwelling place Thou wilt wit be
For ever and ever.

—T. H. Gill.

SERMON.

A Song of Deliverance.

Psalm xlviii.

BY REV. ALEXANDER MACLEAREN—PREACHED IN MANCHESTER, ENGL.

(1) Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness. (2) Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. (3) God is known in her palaces for refuge. (4) For, lo, the kings were assembled, they passed by together. (5) They saw it, and so they marvelled; they were troubled and hasted away. (6) Fear took hold upon them there, and pain, as of a wind. (8) As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God: God will establish it forever. (9) We have thought of Thy loving kindness, O God, in the midst of the temple. (10) According to Thy name, O God, so is Thy praise unto the end of the earth: Thy right hand is full of righteousness. (11) Let Mount Zion rejoice, and let the daughters of Judah be glad because of Thy judgments. (12) Walk about Zion and go round about her; tell the towers thereof. (13) Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it to the generation following. (14) For this God is our God forever and ever; he will be our guide even unto death.

The enthusiastic triumph which throbs in this psalm, and the specific details of a great act of deliverance from a great peril which it contains, sufficiently indicate that it must have had some historical event as its basis. Can we identify the fact which is here embodied?

The psalm gives these points—a formidable master before Jerusalem of hostile people under confederate kings, with the purpose of laying siege to the city—some mysterious check which arrests them before a sword is drawn, as if some panic fear had shot from its towers and shaken their hearts—and a flight in wild confusion from the impregnable dwelling place of the Lord of hosts. The occasion of the terror is vaguely hinted at—as if some solemn mystery brooded over it.

All that is clear about it is that it was purely the work of the Divine hand. "Thou breakest the ships of Tarsish with an east wind," and that in this deliverance, in their own time, the Levite minstrels recognized the working of the same protecting grace which, from of old, had commanded deliverance for Jacob.

Now there is one event, and only one in Jewish history which corresponds, point for point, to these details—the crushing destruction of the Assyrian army under Sennacherib. There, there was the same mustering of various nations, compelled by the conqueror to march in his train, and headed by their tributary kings. There, there was the same arrest before an arrow had been shot, or a mound raised against the city. There, there was the same Divinely agency coming in to destroy the invading army.

I think, then, that from the correspondence of the history with the requirements of the Psalm as well as from several similarities of expression and allusion between the latter and the prophecies of Isaiah, who has recorded that destruction of the invader, we may, with considerable probability, regard this Psalm as the hymn of triumph over the baffled Assyrian, and this marvellous deliverance of Israel by the arm of God.

Whatever may be thought, however, of that allocation of it to a place in the history, the great truths that it contains depend upon no such identification. They are truths for all time; gladness and consolation for all generations. Let us read it over together this morning, if perchance, some echo of the confidence and praise that is found in it may be called forth from our hearts. If you will look at your bibles you

will find that it falls into three portions. There is the glory of Zion, the deliverance of Zion, and the consequent grateful praise, and glad trust of Zion.

I. There is the glory of Zion. Harken with what triumph the psalmist breaks out, "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness. Beautiful for situation (or rather elevation), the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King."

Now these words are something more than mere patriotic feeling. The Jew's glory in Jerusalem was a different thing altogether from the Roman's pride in Rome. To the devout men amongst them, of whom the writer of this Psalm was one, there was one thing, and one only, that made Zion glorious. It was beautiful indeed in its elevation, lifted high upon its rocky mountain. It was safe indeed, isolated from the invader by the precipitous ravines which enclosed and guarded the angle of the mountain plateau on which it stood, but the one thing that gave it glory was that in it God abode. The name even of that earthly Zion was "Jehovah-Shammah," the "Lord is there." And the emphasis of these words is entirely pointed in that direction. What they celebrate concerning Him is not merely the general thought that the Lord is great, but that the Lord is great in Zion. What they celebrate concerning it is that it is His city, the mountain of His holiness, where He dwells, where He manifests Himself. Because there is His self manifestation, therefore He is there greatly to be praised. And because the clear voice of His praise rings out from Zion, therefore is she "the joy of the whole earth." The glory of Zion, then, is that it is the dwelling place of God.

Now, remember, that when the Old Testament scripture speaks about God abiding in Jerusalem, it means no heathenish or material localising of the Deity, nor does it imply any depriving of the rest of the earth of the sanctity of His presence. The very Psalm which most distinctly embodies the thought of God's abode protests against that narrowness, for it begins, "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein." The very ark which was the symbol of His presence, protests by its name against all such localising, for the name of it was, "the ark of the covenant of the God of the whole earth." When the bible speaks of Zion as the dwelling place of God, it is but the expression of the fact that there, between the cherubim, was the visible sign of His presence—that there, in the Temple, as from the centre of the whole land He ruled, and "out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shone."

We are then, not "spiritualising" or forcing a New Testament meaning into these words when we see in them an eternal truth. We are but following in the steps of history and prophecy, and Christ and His apostles, and that last vision of the Apocalypse. We are but distinguishing between an idea and the fact that more or less perfectly embodies it. An idea may have garments, may transmute into many different material forms. The idea of the dwelling of God with men had its less perfect embodiment, has its more perfect embodiment, will have its absolutely perfect embodiment. It has its real but partial embodiment in this present time, when in the midst of the whole community of believing and loving souls, which stretches wider than any society that calls itself a church, the living God abides and energises by His spirit and by His Son in the souls of them that believe upon Him. "Ye are come into Mount Zion and unto the city of the living God." And we wait for the time when, filling all the air with its light, there shall come down from God, a perfect and permanent form of that dwelling, and that great city, the New Jerusalem, "having the glory of God," shall appear, and He will dwell with men and be their God. But in all these stages of the embodiment of that great truth the glory of Zion rests in this, that in it God abides, that from it He flames in the greatness of His manifestations, which are "His praise in all the earth." It is that presence which makes her fair, as it is that presence which keeps her safe. It is that light shining within her palaces—not their own opaque darkness, which streams out far into the waste night with ruddy glow of hospitable invitation.

It is God in her, not anything of her own, that constitutes her "the joy of the whole earth." "Thy beauty was perfect, through my comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord." Zion is where hearts love and trust and follow Christ. The "city of the great King" is a permanent reality in a partial form upon earth, and that partial form is itself a prophecy of the perfection of the heavens.

II. Still further, there is a second portion of this psalm which, passing beyond these introductory thoughts of the glory of Zion, recounts with wonderful power and vigor the process of the deliverance of Zion. It extends from the fourth to the eighth verses.

Mark the dramatic vigor of the description, of the deliverance. There is, first, the mastering of the armies: "The kings were assembled." Some light is thrown upon that phrase by the proud boast which the prophet Isaiah puts into the lips of the Assyrian invader: "Are not my princesses altogether kings?" The subject monarchs of the subdued nationalities that were gathered round the tyrant's standard were used, with the wicked craft of conquerors in all ages, to bring still other lands under the same iron dominion. "The kings were assembled." We see them gathering their far-reaching and noble army, mustered from all corners of that gigantic empire. They advance together against the rocky fortress that towers above its gridding valleys. "They saw it, they marvelled," in wonder, perhaps, at its beauty, as they

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not like a city besieged, and the siege subside when the thing over which contending hosts have been quarrelling has become a ruin, but not one stone has been smitten from the walls, nor oneagate chipped in the windows of the palaces. It is unharmed as well as uncaptured. Thus, we may say, no matter what tempests assail us, wind will but sweep the rotten branches out of the tree. Though war should arise, nothing will be moved that belongs to Thee. We have a city which cannot be moved, and the removal of the things which can be shaken, but makes more manifest its impregnable security, its inexpugnable peace. As in war they will clear away the houses and the flower gardens that have been allowed to come and cluster around about the walls and fill up the moat, yet the walls stand, so in all the conflicts that befall God's church and God's truth, the calming thought ought to be ours: if anything perishes it is a sign that it is not His, but man's excrement on His building. What- ever is His will stand forever. And then with wonderful tenderness and beauty the psalm in its last words drop, as one might say, in one aspect and in another, rises from its contemplations of the immortal city and the community to the thoughts of the individuals that make it up: "For this God is our God forever and ever." "He will be our guide even unto death." Prosaic commentators have often said that these last two words are an interpolation that they do not fit into the strain of the psalm, and have troubled themselves to find out what meaning to attach to them, because it seemed to them so unlikely that, in a hymn that had only to do with community, we should find this expression of individual confidence in anticipation of that most purely personal of all evils. That seems to me the very reason for holding fast to the words as being genuine part of the psalm, because they express a truth, without which the confident hope of the psalm, grand as it is, but poor consolation for each heart. It is not enough for passing, perishing men to say: "Never mind your own individual fate: the society, the community, will stand fast and firm."

I want something more than to know that God will establish Zion for ever. What about me, my own individual self? And the last words answer that. Not merely the city abides, but "He will be our guide even unto death." And surely, if so—if His loving hand will lead the citizens of His eternal kingdom even to the edge of that great darkness—He will not lose them even in its gloom. Surely there is here the veiled hope that if the city be eternal and the gates of the grave cannot prevail against it, the community cannot be eternal unless the individuals be immortal.

Such a hope is vindicated by the blessed words of a newer revelation: "God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He hath prepared for them a city."

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Dear brethren, remember the last words, or all but the last words of scripture which, in their true text and reading tell us how, instead of aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, we may become fellow citizens with the saints. "Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may have a right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gate into the city."

Let us Pray.

Most Holy and Most Gracious God, who turnest the shadow of night into morning, satisfy us early with Thy mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all the day. Lift the light of Thy countenance upon us; calm every troubled thought, and guide our feet into the way of peace. Perfect Thy strength in our weakness, and help us to worship Thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

HYMN.

O Love of God; how strong and true,
Eternal and yet ever new;
Uncomprehended and unbought,
Beyond all knowledge and all thought.

O Love of God; how deep and great;
Far deeper than man's deepest heart;
Self-sed, self-kindled, like the light,
Changeless, eternal, infinite.

O wide-embracing, wondrous love;
We read Thee in the sky above;
We read Thee in the earth below,
In seas that swell and streams that flow.

We read Thee in Him who came,
To bear for us the cross and shame;
Sent by the Father from on high,
Our life to live, our death to die.

O Love of God, our shield and stay
Through all the perils of our way;
Eternal love, in Thee we rest,
For ever safe, for ever blest.

—Horatius Bonar.

Benediction.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore. Amen.