



## SERMON.

## Strength in Church Work.

Preached by Rev. PELHAM WILLIAMS, D. D., at the Mission church of Saint John Baptist on Saint John Baptist's Day, 1892.

And waxed strong in spirit.—St. Luke, i., 80.

How brief and yet how full is this record of your patron saint! It tells us all which the Holy Ghost was pleased to write, of his boyhood, youth and early manhood. Nor can devout fancy add very much to the quiet story. Until he was thirty years of age, and that great soul, by "his showing unto Israel," roused all Jerusalem by the fire of his mighty zeal, we only know that he tarried "in the deserts," that he "waxed strong in spirit," biding his time, which was God's time; and then the burning and shining light flashed forth his blaze as the great voice startled the echoes along the banks of the Jordan, and men's hearts were bowed with the anguish of penitence, and men's hopes were quickened at thought of the coming King and the glories of His Kingdom.

I pause not tonight, beloved, to rehearse the familiar tale of the wondrous life, and work, and the calm death in the dungeon of Machabæus, when the grandest man whom Almighty God had ever made and the greatest prophet whom He had ever inspired, laid down his task, so perfectly wrought out to its very end. I only ask you to think with me about the three words—"Strong in spirit," as true of him, as demanded of you, as requisite in any mission which shall bear his glorious name.

It has been often said, and with obvious truth, that in the mystical body, the priesthood is the back bone. It has been lately said, in sad satire, the more sad if just, that *carries* of the back bone has been the disease of the priesthood in some of the later generations. With most noble exceptions, it may have been true, here and there, that the "like people like priest" has been a bitter prophecy too much fulfilled.

At least, when the priest of God lifts clearly before his own gaze, the face, the heart, the work of the Baptist, and asks "in what am I like him?" he must often feel the stinging rebuke, which his own soft days, and self-indulgence, and much timidity, and "time-serving," under the guise of expediency, so richly merit. If he is not "strong in spirit," but weak under the manifold pressure of ignorance, and prejudice, and worldliness, and restrictions unjustly made and enforced; weak, in the presence of temptation; weak, in the fear of losing position, and income, and favor; weak, in doubting whether the whole truth may be fitly spoken; weak, in recreancy to his trust; weak, in yielding to despondency; weak, in moaning over difficulties, and hindrances, and broken hopes, and inevitable delays,—what loss there must be in his own soul, and then in all which God has sent him to do for other souls.

You may pity a priesthood, which has lost courage, and vigor, and self-denial, but you may grieve, even more, for the church which finds such priests at her altars.

This service tonight, however, rather suggests the question, "what is a strong mission?" The readiest answer would be, "a mission that gathers to its support strong men." Then the question recurs, with St. John the Baptist in view, as a pre-eminent example, "what is a strong man?" We know full well, and we are prompt to reject the counterfeit of many strength. That sort of power does not lie in over-trained muscles; or over-taxed brains; or in self-conceit and swagger; or in superficial charm or skill; or in the glib tongue; or the quick wit; or the heavy purse; or in many phases of what is known as "success." It is as true of character as it is of physique, that the strong man is he who has a strong heart. The Baptist waxed strong in spirit, and hence the reality of his power. So far as we know, he wrought no miracle. He left no memorable sermon to attest his gifts as an orator. He may not have been brilliant in intellect or culture. He gathered no coterie of very distinguished followers. He gained no special victories, in the arena of controversy. I have been thought that, in all his days, he never smiled; and that no personal charm graced his rugged nature. What was it then that drew all Jerusalem to this rough preacher, to listen to his one discourse from his one text? The power was in the voice, and in the man; in the singleness of motive; in the heroic bravery; in the perfect consistency; in the rare humility; in the fervor, and the persistency, in all which went forth from a great heart into a great work for God and man.

Now, my beloved, look into the life of a parish, or a mission such as this, so favored in many ways, so seemingly hindered in some ways, and ask what would you have, if God would give it, and at once. Surely the answer must be, a strong parish heart, in all the full meaning of that phrase.

I. The prime need, in most of our parishes, is the need of clear and deep conviction as to what is the catholic faith, and what is, in its integrity, our catholic heritage. A clear and vigorous conscience is the secret of moral strength; churchmanship must be alike intelligent and thorough, if it shall ever be, in the best sense, strong. Just here, where instruction has been large and continuous and wise, the first element of vigor should have been secured. Great principles of church-life have been taught, urged, enforced, and then enshrined in the midst of ceremonial, sober, rich, and fairly developed. Little more, it might be said, could have been done, to invigorate this mission, by infusing into the minds and consciences of the people, just what the church has received, and must set forth, and must transmit. Yet one may hold with a feeble grip, what he cannot deny, or he may so bring that truth home to his very soul, as a part of his being,

that he would die to maintain it, and, so, that he will live to uphold it.

Ah, there is where the weakness of church-life is so often revealed, in a kind of churchmanship, which is not unsound, but which is nerveless, listless, rapid, inert; which lifts a life into a fashionable Lent, only that it may sink again into a fashionable Easter-tide. There is no abiding conviction that life in the church of God means following the Son of God, as the head of the church, and the exemplar for all His people.

Probably St. John the Baptist could have written his creed in a very few articles: but to those he was grandly true, in thought, and speech, and act; in the presence of publicans and harlots, or before Herod and Herodias, in their adulterous guilt. His convictions were perfectly clear, and so, he "waxed strong in spirit."

II. A parish, like a man, should live for a purpose; like a saintly man, for a holy purpose. High resolve heartens and strengthens a man. It very often lies behind great achievements. Resolute purpose carries the boy to the head of his class, the man to a high place in his vocation. With the Baptist, the purpose of his errand, as the herald foretelling the Christ was held with a perfect tenacity. That purpose fired his blood, and thus he made the blood of men to tingle, as it coursed hotly through their veins. The good parishioner, if he shall deserve that name, must cherish the one purpose in his parish life, as in his home life, to do his utmost for the welfare of the household. That purpose, devoutly sustained in the heart-life of every parishioner would lift many a struggling mission into place and power in the church. No less can be rightly asked of men. No less should be offered.

III. By the costliest sacrifice, the souls of men were ransomed. The church was bought by the Christ for His own. By costly sacrifice, in many a martyrdom, the church was strengthened. And by like sacrifices, like in spirit though unlike in their outward aspect, the church lives and grows today. What does it cost you to be a churchman, or a churchwoman, over and above what it would cost to be the devotee of some exacting form of idolatry? That is a test question, not unfairly asked and pressed. It is not answered by the sum of your contributions, in money or toil, but by the self-denial, which these involve and attest.

IV. A strong life is always shaped by rules, more or less sharply defined. The musician is alike restrained and fortified by the rules of his noble science. The jurist can hardly indulge the caprices of his mind, as to what the law might well have been. He must reach his conclusions under, and in accordance with, what are called principles and precedents. Life in the church of God, which is life for the Son of God, must be guided by the law of God, as exemplified in the Word of God, and as exemplified in the saints of God. What restraint was there, when the Baptist waited in solitude until he had reached the full age of thirty years, thus obeying the Levitical law, ere he came forth from the desert, to lift the cry—"The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." He claimed no exemption for himself, as he would allow none to the royal sinner, on his throne. In our portion of the catholic church, our holy mother lays down very few rigid rules, about her festivals, and fasts, and minor offices, and tithes, and offerings, and modes of life, and forms of amusement. Yet she gives the motherly intimation, the many hints, with gentle authority, and expects her children to catch the spirit of her laws, and to adjust the letter in some measure by the aid of a good conscience. She suggests the rules of churchly life, and then, she leaves it largely for the individual in his growing strictness, to adopt these for himself. What is not done by rule is very likely not to be done at all. What is left to convenience and caprice is most likely, at last, to be omitted altogether. There would be a real gain, and sure strength, if church-folk would adopt cautiously indeed, but reverently, a rule—as to their encharisms; and their attendance at daily prayers; and their offerings; and their private study of God's word; and the kind and measure of their fasting; and their seeking of spiritual direction; and their devotion to church work in their parishes. Christian liberty should never glide into the licence of self-will; and the truest liberty is ever best secured by the wisest laws.

V. And he is strong in his work who calmly leaves all its results with God. You never think of St. John as anxiously counting the number of his disciples; the effect of a special sermon or interview; what men would call the growth of his mission. He leaves the desert when God wills, and because God calls him. In the same spirit he bares his neck for the axe, in the midnight hour, and his great soul goes home to God. The strength of the church is never found in the fuss and bustle, nor in the undue solicitude of God's people. They are not called to be anxious about the ark of God, but to be strong in their trustfulness, and faithful in the labor, whose issues God above can guide, and shape, and bless.

VI. There is one added element of strength, which claims a moment's thought. It is the strength that is allied with enthusiasm; without which, it is said, the noblest triumphs can never be won. The fire on the altar of the heart must ever smoke and blaze. In the Baptist how that fire glowed; as men watched the kindling flame in his eye, and voice, and form, as he stood by the river's bank, in that shaggy robe, gaunt and worn by his fasting, tremendous perseverance, as he sent out the thrilling appeal which smote and rent the hearts of Pharisees and hypocrites, and wrung from them, in their tremor the eager cry, "and what shall we do?"

Enthusiasts, even when grossly deluded, wield a power, which the sluggish can never acquire. The mighty saint, whose festival we keep, sent out his burning message from a heart all aglow with the sense of his high calling, with the grandeur of Messiah's reign. Was it meant that such enthusiasm should die, when the Christ had established His kingdom, and given to it the work and the promise of a world's conquest?

Man is a creature designed for two different states of being, or rather for two different lives. His first life is short and transient; his second permanent and lasting. The question we are all concerned in is this, in which of those lives is our chief interest to make ourselves happy?

version? No, no. It was meant for us to light our torches at the altar of His Sacrifice, and then go forth on His errand, in the light of His love and grace.

So, we meditate awhile tonight on the short words of the text, and think of him who "waxed strong in spirit," and ask, for the coming year, in this Mission church, that we, like him whom we are wont to honor, may learn to be strong in our convictions as to faith and duty. Strong in the life of high resolve; strong in the spirit and habit of sacrifice; strong under definite rules, which touch and fashion our souls; strong in the enthusiasm which bears men on in the face of a hundred threats or trials, and which is the spirit of ghostly strength, glorious even in our weakness; and most glorious as seen in its triumph in the hour of the final reward.

God help you, my dear friends, in this spirit to keep your anniversary, and thus to enter aright upon a new year of privilege and service in this Mission church of St. John the Baptist.

## Gregory the Great.

Born of a noble Roman family about 544 he received an education suitable to his rank, because a member of the senate, and filled several important offices of state. The death of his father put him in possession of great wealth, which he expended in founding monasteries and charitable institutions. Becoming dissatisfied with the world, he took the monastic vows and became a member of one of his own establishments. He showed great devotion to religious duties. Pelagius, the Bishop of Rome, falling a victim to a pestilence that invaded the city, Gregory was unanimously elected his successor. With genuine humility, he earnestly refused the honor, and loudly proclaimed his unworthiness. But in vain; he was thrust into the vacant chair, and plunged at once, with all the ardour of his active mind, into the new constantly increasing cares of the bishopric. He was a great sufferer in body all his days. He once wrote—"I am so oppressed with gout that life is a heavy punishment. I faint daily through pain, and breathe after death as my remedy. Often have I been forced to my bed when I scarce had left it, by the violence of pain. Thus I die daily, and yet live." Yet notwithstanding incessant affliction, the vigour of his mind was unabated and his mental faculties unclouded, and the marvel was that with so weak a body he was able to pursue so laborious and stormy a career. He organised a mission to Britain, which he placed under the superintendence of Augustine, and which succeeded in converting the Anglo-Saxon to Christianity. His astute contest with the patriarch of Constantinople laid the foundation of the schism between the Greek and Latin churches, which continues to the present day. He also found time to write several commentaries and do other literary work. The Church of England is largely indebted to Gregory for the litany and many of the collects used in her service. He lived with the shadow of death consciously hanging over him, and after little more than thirteen years of labor and suffering in his bishopric, he fell asleep in the year 604.

Subjoined a brief specimen of a sermon preached in Rome during the prevalence of pestilence, and which may be taken as a sample of the best preaching of his time. "Beloved brethren, we ought to have feared the scourge of God before it came; at least, after having felt it, let us tremble. Let grief open to us the passages of conversion, and let the punishment which we feel dissolve the hardness of our hearts. "Languor does not precede death, but death itself with hasty strides outstrips the tardy course of languor. Conceive in what state that man will appear before his Judge who is hurried off in the midst of his sins. "Let each of us repent while we have time to weep before the sword devours us. Let us call our ways to remembrance. Let us come before His face with confession and lift up our hearts with our hands to the Lord. Let none despair on account of the greatness of his crimes. Think how the inveterate evils of the Ninevites were wiped off by three days repentance; and the converted robber in the very article of death obtained the rewards of life. Let us change our hearts, and encourage ourselves beforehand with the thought that we have obtained what we ask. Importunity, so disagreeable to man, is well-pleasing to the God of truth; because the good and merciful Lord loves to be overcome by prayers. Remember the psalmist—Call upon me in the time of trouble, so will I hear thee, and thou shalt praise me." He admonishes us to call upon His name, and witnesses by this His readiness to forgive."

## In Love with His People.

For my part, says Dr. Tulloch, I like to meet a man who thinks his own congregation, however small it may be, the most important one in the church, and is rather inclined to bore you with its details. When a man thus falls in love with his people, the probability is that something of the same kind happens to them likewise. Just as a wife prefers her own husband to every other man, though surely she does not necessarily suppose him to be the most brilliant specimen in existence, so a congregation will generally be found to prefer their own minister, if he is a genuine man, to every other, although surely not always entertaining the hallucination that he is a paragon of ability. Thus to love and to be loved is the secret of a happy and successful ministry.

## As God Leads Us.

When engineers would bridge a stream, they often carry over a single thread. With that the next stretch a wire across. Then strand is added to strand until a foundation is laid for planks; and now the bold engineer finds a safe footing, and walks from side to side. So God takes from us some golden-threaded pleasures, and stretches it hence into heaven; then He takes a child, and then a friend. Thus He bridges death, and teaches the thoughts of the most timid to find their way thither and thither between the two spheres.

## Man's Two Lives.

Man is a creature designed for two different states of being, or rather for two different lives. His first life is short and transient; his second permanent and lasting. The question we are all concerned in is this, in which of those lives is our chief interest to make ourselves happy?

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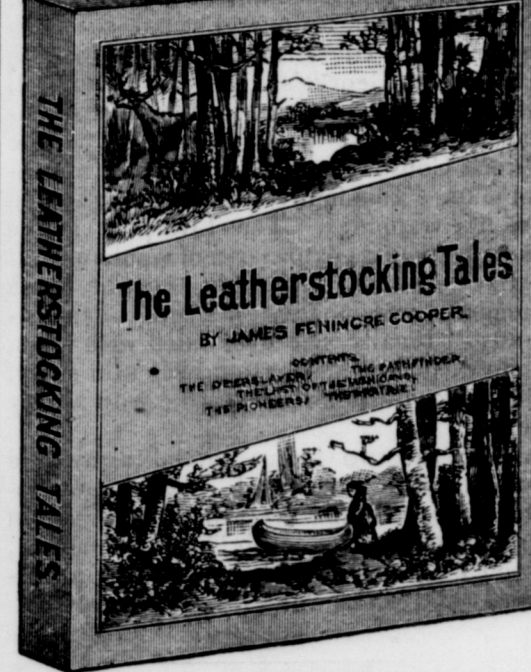
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