



## SERMON.

The Mystery of the Sea.

A Summer Sermon, by Rev. LYMAN ABBOTT, D.D.,  
preached in Plymouth Church, Brooklyn.

"Thy judgments are a great deep"—Ps. xxxvi. 6.

There is a legend that Aristotle committed suicide because he could not understand the cause of the tides. It is not well authenticated, and may probably be dismissed as a myth; but the existence of the myth answers the question, What is the meaning of the sea? To men of all ages the meaning of its moan has been the same; it has spoken of a great mystery. I recall two experiences of my life, which are nothing as I describe them, and yet were much as I passed through them. Once in Illinois, riding along on horseback, I drove off from the beaten track a little way into the prairie and then looked about me. Far off on the border line of the horizon I could see here and there a few trees, and in one or two places a house. For the rest, no sign of human habitation; only the great brown prairie stretching out until the sky and the earth were married in the horizon; and a great sense of infinity stole over me. One March day, coming this way from Europe, the only passenger on deck, I stood for five or six hours behind the smokestack watching the ship as she plunged down the long incline of one great wave, stopped and received shudderingly the shock of the other, and then climbed up its side—stood looking off on the wild waste of waters, dodging now and then behind the smokestack from the oncoming wave, the only other person in sight, a considerable part of the time, the captain on the bridge. Again a great sense of infinity stole over me.

The ocean speaks this message to us all I think at times—the message of infinity—and therefore the message of a great mystery. Stand and look off upon it. How its boundlessness fills you with the sense of the eternal! Stand and look down into it. How the sense of fathomless depth oppresses you! Watch its careless waves beat, never tiring, never resting. Investigate it. This great ocean is itself a continent through which run rivers with no shores, and upon which are seas, the surface of which the wind never tosses into tumultuous confusion. On this watery continent grow forests without roots, and flowers innumerable wafted everywhere and never suffering from drought. In this great waste of waters, as we call it, there is far more vitality than on shore or in the air—microscopic animals infinite in number, great beasts, creatures larger than the land ever knows. From this ocean come strange messengers. Out of it are born all storms; from it all clouds; from it all waterings of the earth; from it all fogs and mists that hang over us, obscuring vision and darkening life.

"What are the wild waves saying?" "Mystery, mystery, mystery." This is their message. And yet as we study the ocean a little more, that study shows that in this mystery there is great beneficence. No longer need any man think of committing suicide because he cannot comprehend the tides. We understand the law of the waves; the limit which the Lord has fixed for them, and beyond which they cannot pass. We have sounded the depths of this great sea, and have measured continents which lie beneath it. We know that beneath this waste of water there are valleys deeper than ever seen on shore, and mountain peaks higher than the Alps or the Himalayas. We know that out of this ocean, though there comes storms and agitation, there comes that atmosphere without which there could be no life. We know that the sea-less moon is a cloudless moon, and therefore a moon without life; and this ocean that covers two-thirds of our globe, that seems like a great waste, is itself the mother of all prolific life. These are the two words the sea has for us; mystery and beneficence. "The judgments of God are a great deep." These are the two words I think the sea has for us respecting God's judgments. They are a great mystery, but in them is a great beneficence.

Let us change Dickens's question: "What is wild life saying to us?" What does life mean—this strange enigma of which we are a part, by which we are so often oppressed, life often seeming so hard, so cruel, so inequitable, so unjust; life so fragmentary; life in which some men seem to be born to happiness, surrounded with good things, to end a joyous life in a peaceful old age, and a happy and honored burial; life that to others brings an evil inheritance, fostered and nurtured by an evil environment, and ending in ignominy and in death? What does life mean? What is life saying?

## What Does Life Mean?

To that question three answers have been given, which, although the descriptive words are not altogether felicitous, I will speak of as the answer of science, the answer of theology, and the answer of poetry. The answer which science has made—science which assumes knowledge sufficient to interpret life fully—science which under the pseudonym of agnosticism rivals in its pretensions the gnosticism of the early ages—the answer which this science makes is, Life is without any moral quality whatsoever. Life is immoral. There is no justice in it. "From the point of view," says Mr. Huxley, "of the moralist, the animal world is about on the same level as a gladiators' show. The creatures are fairly well treated and set to fight, whereby the strongest, the swiftest, and the cunningest live to fight another day. The spectator has no reason to turn his thumbs down, as no quarter is given." The world of humanity is no better. "If I desire to represent the course of nature as it is, I must represent the course of nature as it is, and assume that it is intended to be that which it is, and say that its governing principle is

intellectual, not moral; that it is a materialized logical process, accompanied by pleasures and pains, the incidence of which in the majority of cases has not the slightest reference to moral desert."

This is the first answer which is given to the question, What is life? It is a mere mechanism, a mere unmoral thing; but intellectually, but not moral with design, but without love or justice. We turn from this view of life to ask the theologian what is his interpretation; and the theologians, certainly not all theologians—in some sense every minister is a theologian—but the answer of that theology which assumes to understand life and to interpret it, that answer is that life is not unmoral, but immoral. For the theologian, taking just so much of life as he can see, sees this: that men are inequity treated. He sees that some men are put into paths of virtue and goodness, and some men into paths of vice and of shame; and he says that God that rules has picked these out for this, and those for that. There is a God, a ruler, and He governs, but He governs by no principles that you and I could for one instant call moral principles. He selects some men without any choice or action of their own for virtue. He selects other men without any choice or action of their own part for vice, and if one complains, saying, "This is unjust," the theologian answers, taking words of scripture for his answer, "God's thoughts are not as our thoughts," and "How shall the clay find fault with the potter?" Now, this view of life is immoral; that is to say, it offers an interpretation of life which is against the moral instincts of humanity, and declares that God is not actuated by the principles which conscience recognizes as the principles of justice and morality. The third answer—the answer of the poets, answer of the prophets, answer of men who interpret life from the point of view of a great moral intuition—answer of our text—"The judgments of God are a great deep."

## Life is Love.

Life is, first of all, a mystery. You cannot understand it, and therefore you cannot sit in judgment upon it. You are not competent to say whether it is moral or immoral. The two books in the bible which treat of the judgment of God are the books of Revelation and Job. They both give the same answer to it—life is one great insoluble mystery. At every side we are surrounded with mystery. The telescope discovers the far dust to be worlds of fire, but finds another star dust beyond; it solves one mystery only to introduce other mysteries. We study the early origin of the globe or the early origin of man; run back our mind a little way, but presently come to a great blank beyond which we cannot go. We turn to material things; catch the lightning, tame and harness it, set to our uses, require it to light our buildings, run our messages, serve our needs; but when we ask ourselves, "What is this lightning which we tame and harness?" no man can tell us. We do not even know whether it is matter or whether it is force. If, then, we are envied in Nature by mysteries in the moral world?

It is hard that this boy begun his life cradled in a tenement house. How do you know he begun his life there? Are you sure that life begins at the cradle, that there is no other life back of this? It is hard that this man who has lived all his life surrounded by a faded atmosphere, with no gospel preached to him, or none that he has understood, should go out at death into the darkness of a hopeless night. How do you know he goes out into the darkness of a hopeless night? What revelation, what angel has given you the right to say that God's mercy stops at the grave, and that there is no life of hope beyond it—perhaps in a school where life renders better service and where mercy has a better opportunity? I do not aver that the grave opens into another schoolroom, but I ask you what right have you to say that it does not? This man suffers and weeps many, many tears. This man goes through life clothed in purple and fine linen, happy all his life. But is happiness the best or tears the worst that can befall a man? Are we set in life simply that we may smile, or guarded by love, at least may not weep? There is nothing worth living for but character, and there is no character but love. And this tumultuous, tearful, perplexing, storm-tossed life of ours may be the very divinest method of making character. Surely it is but a poor way of making laughter.

Browning has put in one great, noble sentence the fundamental declaration of all poets and prophets:

God, Thou art love: I build my faith on that. This is not the superstructure reared on a scientific basis, but the very foundation on which all else shall be built. It is unthinkable that life is a tomb and evil is victorious and goodness is to be a great wreck. So looking at life, not imagining for a moment that we see the whole of it, certain that we look only on one little section of God's great work, realizing that what He is working for is not happiness, but character, and that character is love, still life is a mystery; but it is no longer an appalling and a despairing mystery.

I have lived, then, done and suffered, loved and hated, learnt and taught. This—there is no reconciling wisdom with a world distraught. Goodness with triumphant evil, power with failure in the aim. If—(to my own sense remember! tho' none other feel the same)—If you bar me from assuming earth to be a pupil's place, And life, time—with all their chances, changes—just probation space, Mine, for me.

## No More Sea.

If the Psalmist, standing on the shore of the Mediterranean, asking "What are the wild waves saying?" and getting from their moaning music this answer, "The judgments of God are a great deep"—if he had possessed a little clearer understanding, would perhaps have heard those waves saying this also: "What I do now thou knowest not, but thou shalt know hereafter." For, science exploring this mystery of the ocean, and still leaving much of it mysterious and unexplained, has learned

this at least: there is no howling waste of waters. It is itself, as I have said, the mother of life, and all the streams that are brooded on its surface are life-giving and life-saving. There are two texts in Revelation that used to seem to me incongruous, inharmonious. One: "There shall be no sea." The other: "I beheld a sea clear as crystal." Now environed with mystery, covered with fog, seeing but a little, not knowing how life began, not knowing what may lie beyond its seeming end, not able to comprehend it, nor the divine purpose and end in it all—to us life is a great mystery, and "the judgments of God are a great deep." But by-and-by, when we stand on the other shore, there will be no more storm, no more fog, no more mystery; all will be clear because we shall see life from the beginning to the end, and standing by God's own throne, and invested with God's own vision, shall know as we are known. His judgments will no longer be a great deep. "There shall be no more sea"—or, "The sea shall be clear as crystal." I remember once sailing over the crystal waters of Lake Superior. We had come out of the muddy waters of Lake Huron during the night, and early in the morning I came on deck, and looking over the prow, started back in instinctive terror, for, looking down into the clear waters of that lake it seemed to me as though our keel was just going to strike on the sharp-pointed rocks below, but I was looking through fifty or sixty feet of clear water at the great rock bed of the lake over which we were sailing. Now we endeavor in vain to fathom God's judgment. As by a great deep, they are hidden from us. But by-and-by the sea will grow clear as crystal, and through the mystery we shall see and shall understand; we shall know not only the life that was in the ocean, but shall trace the footprints of Him that walked thereon.

## Seven Years Without a Birthday.

A Scottish clergyman, who died nearly thirty years ago, Mr. Leishman, of Kinross, used to tell that he had once lived seven years without a birthday. The statement puzzled most who heard it. They could see that if he had been born on the twenty-ninth of February, he would have no birthday except in a leap year. But leap year comes once in four years, and this accounts for a gap of three years only; their first thought would, therefore, naturally be that the old man, who, in fact, was fond of a harmless jest, was somehow jesting about the seven. There was, however, no joke or trick in his assertion.

At the present time there can be very few, if there are any, who have this tale to tell of themselves, for one who can tell it must have been born on the twenty-ninth day of February at least ninety-six years ago. But a similar line of missing dates is soon now to return; and indeed there are, no doubt, some readers who will have only one birthday to celebrate for nearly twenty years to come.

The solution of the puzzle is to be found in the fact, which does not appear to be widely known, that the year 1800 was not a leap year, and 1900 will not be. The February of the present year had twenty-nine days, but in all the seven years intervening between 1896 and 1904, as well as in the three between 1892 and 1896, that month will have only twenty-eight.

## The Spirit of Unselfishness.

One of the earliest lessons in training children to be unselfish is to teach them to rejoice in the happiness of others. It is a natural impulse when some rare pleasure is offered to one child in the family for those who cannot share the enjoyment to be a trifle envious. If the sister is singled out to take a delightful journey, the brother grumbles because he is not included in the invitation. If a favorite uncle makes Jack a present of a bicycle, Mary pouts because no gift is bestowed upon her. All such cases offer an opportunity for parents to develop in the children that highest form of unselfishness which finds its joy in the happiness of others. Few adults, however, possess this grace in its fullness.

They are far readier to weep with those who weep than to rejoice with those who rejoice. But nothing wins friends more easily than the habit of entering heartily into the plans of others and expressing pleasure at their success or good fortune. "Your letter this morning," writes one who has always cultivated this gift of loving kindness, "brought a great happiness into my day because of the pleasure in store for you which it chronicled." Were this spirit more prevalent how much sunshine would be added to our lives.

## Our Worldly Business.

The reason we have so many dead failures is that parents decide for children what they shall do, or children themselves, wrought on by some whim or fancy, decide for themselves without any implication of Divine guidance. So we have now in pulpits men making sermons who ought to be in blacksmith shops making plowshares, and we have in the law those who, instead of running the cases of their clients, ought to be pounding shoe lasts, and doctors who are the worst hindrances to their patients' convalescence, and artists trying to paint landscapes who ought to be whitewashing board fences. While there are others making brick who ought to be remodeling constitutions, or shoving planes who ought to be transforming literatures. Ask God about what worldly business you shall undertake until you are so positive you can in earnest smite your hand on your plow handle, or your carpenter's bench, or your Blackstone's commentaries, or your medical dictionary, or your Dr. Dick's Didactic Theology, saying: "For this end was I born."—*Te De Witt Talmage.*

## The Centre of Hindoosim.

Benares, the religious centre of all India since countless generations before Christ, is described as a city which bears the same relation to Hindoosim (or Buddhism) that Bethlehem did and does to Christendom. Its origin cannot, it is said, be traced by any man. It was occupied by hundreds of thousands of people over six centuries before the Christian era. There are over 500,000,000 people in the world who bow to the Buddhist faith—worshipping as devoutly as ever Christian worshipped Christ.

## Go to Church on Bicycles.

The Manchester *Saturday Herald* has the following, which will no doubt be a pointer: The Centre church committee is going to set aside one of the horse sheds as a bicycle shed. Not a few persons who attend the Sunday and weekly

night meetings ride to and from the church on bicycles. Now they have to leave their bicycles outside, where the small boys tamper with them, and where, in case of a sudden shower, the machines would be injured by the wet. The shed will be enclosed and conveniently arranged for the storage of bicycles. So far as we can learn the Centre church is the first in the country to provide a bicycle shed.

## A Bullet in His Head Forty Years.

An interesting surgical study is that of a man who has just died at St. Gallen. This man, a certain Christian Zogg, was a soldier in the "Sonderbund" war, forty-three years ago, and in the fight at Kiemengratt he was severely wounded with a bullet in the head. The surgeon could not extract the ball, for it had pierced behind the ear, and lay against the hard skull. No one thought he could live, but he did, swearing always he had the bullet still in his head. Of course, after a time no one believed him, though he suffered from terrible headaches and occasional feeble-mindedness. But when he died his skull was opened, and surely enough he had lived for over forty years with this bullet in his head. The skull at the point where the bullet lay was three or four times as thick as elsewhere, and a piece the size of a very small egg had been forced aside.

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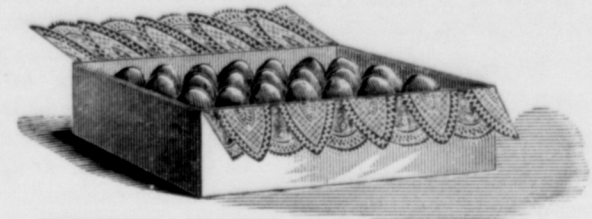
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