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FREDERICTON, N. B., SATURDAY, AUGUST 4, 1888.

[100 per Annum.
Vol. XLIV., No. 40]

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Jesus Gathering Lilies.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Pat's Church, Fredericton, July 29th.

"My beloved is gone down into His garden . . . to gather lilies."—SONG OF SOLOMON VI. 2.

The song of Solomon is fittingly called the song of songs, for it is the sweetest love-song that was ever sung. It is a beautiful allegory, and if we will read it right, we will find it is full of Jesus and His love for His church and His people, and their love for Him. Jesus is pictured out as a royal bridegroom and the church as His beautiful bride. Now you find them in the chambers clasped in each other's arms and fondly doing on each other's loveliness. Now there is a lover's quarrel or something of the sort and a withdrawing from each other, and then the penitent bride, with many sighs and tears, is found going up and down the streets of the city bewailing her loss and seeking her beloved. Now they are reconciled, and walking arm in arm in the garden, rejoicing in the singing of birds and the blooming of flowers, admiring the putting forth of the fig-tree's green figs and the vine's tender grapes. Now they are out in the wilderness, where the lions growl around them, and the storm beats upon them, and the weary frightened bride clings close to the side of her husband as he gently leads her out of it, and brings her to their own bright and happy palace-home. Now there is a banquet, the table loaded with luxuries, the friends of bridegroom and bride welcomed, and joy unspeakable and full of glory. Now again the dark night comes on, and the sleep of careless indifference takes the bride, and her beloved is gone from her side, and she is left so broken-hearted and desolate.

Thus, if you will follow it out, you will find beautifully pictured out in the richest of oriental imagery, the joys and sorrows, the sunshine and shade, the ups and downs, the sweets and bitters, the loves and hates, of the checkered christian experience.

Now to-night I want to introduce you to one of the somewhat sad scenes of this beautiful allegorical song, Jesus in His garden gathering lilies.

And first, let us take a turn round His garden, and have a look at it. His garden is in the midst of a wilderness. In fact, it was all wilderness once, but He has reclaimed this beautiful spot, and built a high strong wall around it to keep out the wild beasts that infest the wilderness. If you climb up and look over the wall, you will see that there is nothing but the wildest waste far as the eye can carry. The lions have their den in that dark gulch down there. Yonder are the mountains of the leopards. Anacondas are coiled up asleep in that jungle. The foxes come out of this thick brake, and spoil the vines that run over the wall. Ruthless robber-bands rendezvous in yonder fearful mountain-pass, and they sometimes attack and kill the King's servants, and plunder his beautiful garden. But the time will come, sooner or later, when the whole of that vast wilderness will be reclaimed, when the lions and tigers and serpents will be destroyed, and when the dangerous freebooters will be won over to the King's service. How blessed when that wilderness is all like this garden!

The King is proud of His garden. He has planted it with the choicest fruit-trees and the loveliest flowers. Here are orchards of pomegranates, with their splendid blossoms and pleasant fruits, and birds of every hue, darting about, and building their nests, and caroling their happy lays among the branches. Here are shrubberies of the camphor-plant, with its clusters of delicate lilac-colored flowers, and its odors of paradise, scenting all the air. Here are the beds of spikenard and saffron all abloom, the dark flowers of the spikenard contrasting beautifully with the bright of the saffron, and perfuming all the garden with their delightful fragrance. Here are groves of the cinnamon-tree and the calamus, the lign-aloe and the myrrh, and all the trees of frankincense, and all the spices. Here are great orchards of fig-trees, and every tree loaded with fruitfulness. Here are forests of palms, their feathery tops lifted heavenwards, and rich bunches of dates ready to be gathered hanging temptingly within reach of the hungry

passer-by. Here are miles of shady walks beneath trellised vines, and they are richly ornamented with splendid clusters of the finest grapes. Here are beds of lilies, lilies of all kinds, lilies of the valley, lilies outrivalling Solomon's glory with the ruby splendors of their blossoms, and speaking to men of a glory that is heavenly and eternal. In a word, everything that is beautiful to the eye, and sweet to the taste, and aromatic to the sense of smell, is to be found in the garden of the King.

The church is Christ's garden. He has planted the church in the world's wilderness, and has fenced it all around with the strong high wall of His commandments and ordinances, and has stocked it with the choicest fruit-trees and the rarest flowers.

To so many the church is without any beauty whatever. Her ordinances are uninteresting and unattractive. Her services have none of the fragrance of Heaven about them. You never hear them singing with David: "How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts!" The vines of the Lord's vineyard are no better to them than the vines of the wilderness. The Lord's fig-trees are no more fruitful, and the figs no better figs. The palms are no loftier and no straighter. The Lebanon cedars are no grander. The lilies are no fairer. They would as soon the grapes and figs, the lilies and roses, of the wilderness, as those of the King's own garden.

But to the King himself there is no place in all the world so sweet as His own garden; no trees so fine as the trees of His own planting; and no flowers so fair as His own lilies. He loves to walk up and down the flowery walks, feasting His eyes on the beauties of flowers and fruits, or stand in the spice-groves, listening with rapture to the birds of song as they sing among the branches, or sit in the arbor of trellised vines, eating with pleasure the great clusters of ripe grapes that hang temptingly before Him. If you want to find Jesus, go to His garden, and you will find Him there.

The spouse tells us that she lost her beloved, lost the sweet sense of His presence and love, and she set out to seek for Him. She went into the city to seek for Him, and she walked up and down the crowded streets looking for Him. She asked the watchmen who go about the city if they had seen Him, but they only mocked her anxiety and abused her confidence. He was not in the great, noisy, wicked city. Where, then, could He be? Ah! He was in His garden. He had "gone down into His garden, to the beds of spices, to feed in the garden, and to gather lilies. When she went there she found Him.

O seeking, anxious soul, if you want to find Jesus; if you want to find that which will bring your soul comfort, peace, light, joy, hope, salvation, go not to the cities of the world, the noise of the streets, to seek for it; go not to the marts of business to seek for it; go not to the broadways of pleasure to seek for it; go not to the men of the world to seek for it. They will disappoint and deceive. They will tell you they can make you happy, minister to your relief, heal your soul's troubles, do you good. But give no heed to them, for they cannot. Jesus is not in the city, and it is Jesus you want. You must go into the retirement of the garden if you would find Him. You must seek Him in His word, in the ordinances of His church; you must shut yourself up in the privacy of your chamber, and on your knees seek Him there, and you will not seek in vain.

But this leads me to speak, in the next place, of Jesus in His garden gathering lilies. The garden is His garden. Those splendid grapes are His grapes. Those fig-trees with their wealth of figs are His. Those beautiful lilies are His lilies. He planted them. His rain watered them. His sunshine warmed them. His glory beautified them. He has a right to come into His garden. He has a right to pluck those ripe clusters of grapes. He has a right to shake down a shower of juicy figs from His own fig-trees. He has a right to gather the lilies.

I see the King coming down into His garden. He is gloriously attired. His robes are white as the light. A crown of the finest gold is on His head, and a jewelled ring on His finger. There is a smile of ineffable sweetness lighting up His face as He contemplates the beauties around Him. He walks slowly and softly along the garden-walks, and in and out among the lovely flower beds, now stopping to admire the regal splendors of some rare species, now stooping to prop up some fallen spray whose beauty is trailing in the dust; now gently part-

ing the flowery profusion to get a better look at some lowly bloomer, and now bending low down to scent the sweetness of some fragrant blossom.

But it is to gather lilies He has come down into His garden to-day, and He bends His steps towards the lily-beds. How sweetly and modestly they bow their heads at His approach, and look their loveliest! Some of them are white and pure like the Heaven they are destined for; others of them are golden and glorious like the crown on the King's head. Some are tall and stately; others lowly and lovely. All around about the air is fragrant with their delicate perfume. He stands and admires their beauties, and wonders what flowers He will gather for a garland for Himself to-day. Here perhaps is a very delicate flower, too delicate to bloom in so wintry a clime; so He puts forth His jewelled hand and gently plucks that one. Over on the other side of the bed he sees a group of lilies all blooming together so sweetly; so He goes away over and plucks the fairest and sweetest. Sometimes you find Him looking for lilies where you would not expect Him to look for them, in out-of-the-way and secluded corners of the garden, and finding them too, and coming back with choice flowers He has gathered.

But His chaplet of flowers is not yet complete. He wants a blossom and bud. But where will He find just what He wants! He goes from lily-bed to lily-bed as if looking for what He wants, and as if hard to satisfy. By and by He comes to a group where He has been before, and so pleased was He then that He comes again. He has found what He wants. His eye rests upon it, and He says softly to Himself: "I must have that lovely lily." What a struggle the chosen lily had to be what it has come to be, but the struggle it has had, helped its loveliness, perfected its beauty! Often had He looked at it before, and it was felt that the lily was not to be left blooming long here. Again and again had He stretched forth His hand as if to pluck it, but again and again had He withdrawn it, and it was left to bloom on until it had come to be so lovely. At last came the day, not looked for, when the lily that was, was not, for the King had taken it.

Then it was said: "Now will the King be satisfied with gathering lilies from that lily-bed." But He comes again, and His coming was not at first observed. But a choice bud just opening into beauty and fragrance is there, and that bud the King seeks for Himself. By and by when His purpose comes to be better understood, it was said: "No; we cannot spare the bud just yet; let it stay with us, and grow and bloom out more fully. The lily-bed will be so bare without the bud." But the King lingered on; He did not go away. And at last it was said, though not without tears, "The King shall have the bud as well as the blossom." For it was remembered that the blossom and bud were strangely, lovingly linked to one another. So, blossom and bud are gathered, and with the King, where their beauty can never fade, and their sweetness can never be other than sweetness.

Some christians are like the vine and full of clusters of grapes like the grapes of Eshcol. Some are like the fig-tree laden to the ground with ripe and juicy figs. Some are like the lofty palms, and some are like the Lebanon cedars. Some are fragrant like the spikenard, and some are fair like the lily. They are all different, and they are all beautiful. In the Lord's garden there are an Abraham and a Moses, a Joseph and a Daniel, a Samson and a Samuel, a Peter and a Paul, a Mary and a Phebe, a Dorcas and a Lydia, a gray-haired Methuselah with the weight of centuries bowing down his back, and a young Timothy with his lithe form and laughing face.

We do not want a garden that is all flower, nor all fruit. A garden that was all vines and yielded nothing but the grapes of Eshcol, or that was all beautiful lilies of the valley, would be very commonplace after a while.

I would not like a congregation to preach to that was made up of great-faithed Abrahams, or mighty-principled Pauls, or sweet-faced Marys of Bethany. I would want to sit down in the pews and let them preach. We want to have in our churches the fruitful vines, the stately palms, the wide-spreading cedars, the fragrant lign-aloes, and the beautiful lilies, all fruit-bearing, and fragrance-making, and flowering together.

Jesus looks for grapes from the vines in His garden. He expects stiteliness in His palms and strength in His cedars. He wants oil from the olive, figs from the fig-tree, and fragrance from the cinnamon. But when He goes into His

garden to gather lilies, it is not the fruitfulness of the vine, nor the grandeur of the Lebanon cedar, nor the sublimity of the palm-tree. He looks for, but the beauty and sweetness of the lily. Do not let the vine with its great cluster of grapes say: "I am of more use to the King than the lily that does nothing but bloom and die." Do not let the Lebanon cedar boast over the sweet-scented thyme-wood. The King wants to have them all in His garden, and He has a use for them all, and loves them all. Sometimes He goes down into His garden, and He passes by the grapes of Eshcol with their tempting clusters, and goes away past the orchards of pomegranates with their pleasant fruits, and hastens through the groves of cinnamon and calamus as if He did not want to smell their sweetness, and He stops at the beds of lilies to gather them. He is as proud of the lilies in His garden, as He is of His grapes and His cedars. He has a place in Heaven for the flowers as well as the fruits, and a bright place it is too, the brightest place there.

And are we reluctant to have the lilies taken? Shall Jesus have nothing, that is young and sweet and beautiful? nothing but what has served out its day and ripened into decay? Is it only the sere and yellow leaf of age that we want Jesus to have? Is it only the fruit that the world's wintry blasts have shaken down into the grave that the King of glory shall gather? Will we place ourselves at the garden-gate, and protest with all our little might against His coming to gather the lilies? No. Jesus shall have the brightest and best. The lilies are His as well as the grapes, and He shall have them.

The poet Longfellow beautifully paraphrases this thought thus:

There is a reaper whose name is death,
And, with his sickle keen,
He reaps the bearded grain at a breath,
And the flowers that grow between,

"Shall I have nought that is fair?" saith he;
'Have nought but the bearded grain;
Though the breath of these flowers is sweet to me
I will give them all back again."

He gazed at the flowers with tearful eyes,
He kissed their drooping leaves;
It was for the Lord of Paradise
He bound them in his sheaves.

"My Lord has need of these flowerets gay,"
The Reaper said, and smiled;
'Dear tokens of the earth are they,
Where He was once a child."

"They shall all bloom in fields of light,
Transplanted by my care;
And saints, upon their garments white
These sacred blossoms wear."

And the mother gave, in tears and pain,
The flowers she most did love;
She knew she would find them all again
In the fields of light above.

Oh, not in cruelty, not in wrath,
The Reaper came that day;
'Twas an angel visited the green earth
And took the flowers away.

There is a sweet comforting thought in the text. It is this. The christian's Beloved gathers the lilies. He is no enemy who has broken over the garden-wall and despoiled the beautiful flower-beds. We look with blinding tears in our eyes at the vacant spot where some dear flower once bloomed so sweetly, and we say: "It was the cruel north-wind that did it. It was the terrible death-worm that devoured it. It was some cruel cruel hand that plucked it." But no; it was a beloved that did it. It was a dear dear friend that plucked the lily. It was One who loved the lily and loved you that gathered it, and it was because He loved and was loved that He did it.

And moreover, it seems to me, He is all the more a beloved, because He has gathered the lilies. We do not know how dear Jesus is till He has brought us some great sorrow; and we do not know how near He is to us till He has come and asserted His right to the lilies we thought were ours. They are ours, and they are His too; but they are more His than ours. When He comes to gather them, we stand by with weeping eyes and breaking hearts, and we ask: "Will you go with Jesus, or stay with us?" and they say, "We will go with Jesus."

Here is a beautiful lily that the Lord gave you to grow for Him. He said, 'Keep it till I come for it.' You loved the lily; everybody loves lilies. You watched its growth. You saw with joy its opening beauties. But when it had bloomed out, or hardly, the King came for His lily. You met Him at the garden-gate, and with a trembling at the heart, you said, "O King Jesus, come in." But when He said to you, "I have come for that lily of mine," your heart sank within you, and your tears dropped

Continued on fourth page.