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Our Pulpit.

Abraham the Friend of God.

CLOSING YEARS.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Paul's Church Fredericton, May 6th.

"And Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years, and was gathered to his people. And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah.— GEN. XXV. 8, 9.

We all admire a beautiful sunset, and we need not go far to see one. Standing on the bridge at this season, or perhaps somewhat later, when the sun sets directly up river, we may see sunsets, almost, if not altogether, as fine as we may see anywhere, sunsets as lovely as poet's pen or painter's brush ever attempted to picture out, sunsets that for splendor and gorgeousness rival those of fairer lands and sunnier climes.

Last summer on my return journey from the Pacific coast I came by the way of Lake Superior. The weather was delightful, and the sail over the lake in the magnificent iron steamship Alberta was a pleasure not soon to be forgotten. It was on the afternoon of a lovely July day we embarked, and the great Lake was a sea of glass. That evening a number of us gathered on the upper deck to see a Lake Superior sunset, and it was one of rare loveliness. The sun was perhaps half an hour or three quarters high, and looked like a great ball of molten gold, glowing, glorious, slowly sinking into the burnished waters. The ship as she ploued along left behind her the glassy surface broken up into innumerable wavelets, that rose and fell, and widened out as they receded and those wavelets, catching up the reflection, became rippling gold and jasper of every shade. As the sun sank lower, cloudlets and cloud-bands partially obscured his ruddy radiance, but they themselves were lit up with glory, and enhanced the brilliance of the scene. With subdued splendor, and veiled in a haze, he sank out of our sight behind the waters, but after he was gone, the glory of what he had been still lingered in sky and sea, and slowly, reluctantly, yielded to the gathering darkness. We turned away at last solemnized by the splendid sight our eyes had gazed upon, moralizing on the fading character of all such earthly scenes, and more especially when in the night the vessel's fog-whistle began to blow its wierd blasts, and the ship had to slow up.

But, my friends, it is of another sort of sunset I am to speak to you to-night, the sunset of Abraham's life-day. We have seen him rise in the far east, the lovely morning-land of the world's history and the human race, the country watered by those ancient rivers the Euphrates and Tigris, and where tradition located the garden of Eden. We have followed his brilliant course westward, and we have gladly basked in the noonday splendors of his faith. And now we have come to his setting, and we would expect a glorious setting for so brilliant a career. But it is not as brilliant as we would expect. There is a measure of disappointment about it. If his sun does not go down under a cloud, it does at least in a haze that partially obscures his brilliance and disappoints us. But after all, a day is not to be estimated by the brilliance of its sunset, but by what it has been through all its long busy hours of light and warmth. And so with Abraham's life-day. Its sunset may be wanting in the splendors we love to gaze upon; it may be commonplace and uninteresting; disappointing; but, taking his life as a whole, what a grand life, how full of all that the ages as they come and go can never let perish!

Coming, however, to the few particulars and incidents of his closing years, we have first a remark or two to make about his marriage with Keturah.

This marriage with Keturah has been fruitful of unprofitable discussion, and not likely it ever can be cleared up to the satisfaction of all parties. Some hold that this marriage must have taken place during Sarah's life, and they urge in support of this theory not a few strong arguments. She is called a concubine, or secondary wife, her children seem to have been grown up, and were sent away to do for themselves, previous to Abraham's death; and then, much stress is laid on what may be called the physiological argument, for the patriarch even before the birth of Isaac, according to the Apostle, considered his body

as good as dead. If there was anything in that when he was not a hundred, it is argued, how could he be the father of six sons after he was one hundred and thirty-seven? Still, the weight of opinion is in favor of the theory that his marriage with Keturah took place, not before, but after, Sarah's death, and certainly it reads as if it did. "And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her, and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death. And Abraham took another wife, and her name was Keturah." Then again there was time. Abraham lived thirty-eight years after Sarah's death, and thirty-five after Isaac's marriage, so that it he married Keturah after Isaac had married, and if we allow fifteen years for the birth of her six sons, that would make the youngest of them twenty years of age at his father's death—an age not too early even at that time to be sent away to do for himself. As we have seen, Ishmael was sent away when he was a lad of seventeen. The physiological argument, I grant, is not so easily got over. But if there was a renewal of youth, as would seem to have been the case, both with Sarah and Abraham before the birth of Isaac, may not this renewal of youth have been continued in his case, for it must be remembered, that according to the terms of the promise, he was not only to be the father of the promised seed, but he was to be the father of many nations? Thus, this marriage may have had more of the Divine approval than we are willing to accord to it.

To us, to me, it has always seemed a step back and down for Abraham to have married Keturah, an evidence that he had come to his dotage, his second childhood. But I may be all wrong. The hand that guided his steps from Ur to Haran, and from Haran to Canaan, may have guided him in this step also. At all events he married Keturah.

Who Keturah was is not known, whether one of his own female slaves, or some neighboring sheik's daughter. I incline to the ordinary opinion that she had been simply what Hagar had been before her, a female slave, probably of more than ordinary worth and character, and so Abraham made her in his old age his wife, but not as Sarah had been his wife, his helpmeet, his equal, his companion. She was never otherwise than a secondary wife. Keturah bore him six sons, namely, Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah. To these he gave portions during his life, and sent them away to the east country, so that they might not be an annoyance to Isaac. This was wise on his part, shewing that however much he may have failed in other respects, he maintained his prudence and sound commonsense up to the last.

A second incident in his closing years that must have been intensely gratifying to him, was the birth of Isaac's twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Rebekah, as she rode away from her father's house to be a bride, heard it wished for her by her friends, that she be the mother of a numerous progeny; but for twenty years after her marriage she remained childless. This must have been an anxiety to Abraham, and seems to have been a bitter disappointment to Rebekah herself. But after special prayer on her behalf by her good husband, she became the mother of twins. These twins were as different as they could be from their birth—different in appearance as well as in everything else.

Abraham lived long enough to see them well grown boys fifteen years of age, and he would take a very special interest in the growing boys, knowing, as he did, how much depended on them. He would often tell them with his own lips of the promise that had been and done so much for him, and was to be and do so much for them, and one of them, at least, was greatly interested in those earnest talks. His young soul caught hold of the truth, and it grew upon him and with him through the years, and it became an inspiration to him in all he was and wanted to be. The other cared not for his grandfather's stories about the promise and the future. He liked better to chase the deer on the hills, and shoot them down with his unerring bow, for he was a born-hunter. And when his aged grand sire was on his death-bed, he may have sometimes brought him a dish of the savory venison he had prepared with his own hands, and the old man would relish it perhaps when he could not anything else.

Thus Esau's venison came to be a toothsome dish with all epicures, and Isaac admired and loved his hunter-boy, so wild and free in his rude ways.

Jacob the home-boy, on the other hand, was his mother's favorite, and she hoped so much from him, for he was so clever and wise. And this partiality on the part of the parents led to trouble in after years—a trouble that proved sadly detrimental to the home's peace, and divided it.

Thirdly, Abraham's Death. We would like to know the full particulars of the end of so grand a life, but sacred chroniclers care more for lives than death beds, and so we have almost nothing. Abraham's end seems to have been foreseen some time before it took place. I infer this from the fact that Ishmael had been sent for from his desert-home, and if he was not in time to receive his father's parting blessing, he was in time to be present at his funeral.

I have no doubt that Abraham had been failing for years, and was almost lost to view in the privacy of his own home. His work was done, and now he was waiting with a calm trust and hope the day of his death. He had perhaps outlived his usefulness, and in his weak dotage had done some imprudent things. We are not sure of that, but that is about the only sensible view one can take of the Keturah marriage. But at last the solemn hour is upon him, and he has nothing to do but die. He has lived in view of the future all his life, and it is sweet to die, and he dies so easily and sweetly at the advanced age of one hundred and seventy-five years.

Moses says, 'Abraham gave up the ghost,' a phraseology we do not like but the revisors have retained it. *Ghost* and *quest* are derived from the same Anglo-Saxon word *gast*; and if so, how pleasant to think of the soul as a guest. For long years this heavenly guest had abode in the earthly tabernacle, but the time had come for the departure of the guest, and Abraham, not without reluctance, gave him up. And the guest returned to God who gave it to be His guest, and so we read of Abraham being at a banquet in the Blessed World, and of the place next to him being a specially honored place. All this may seem far-fetched and fanciful to matter-of-fact minds, but there may be more of truth in it than we know.

And then it is further said of him: 'And died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years.' Here is the redundancy of the original; the heaping together of words and phrases, to tell us how fully he had lived out his life. He at least was satisfied with living. So many are not. They die too soon. They die before their work is half done, before indeed it is well begun; die, having done nothing, nor tried to do anything that was worth living for. But not so with Abraham. He tried to do something worthy of life, and he did it, did all there was given him to do. His was a full life, a rounded whole. Not that it was perfect. Ah! you can easily find flaws, and very serious ones. But he did his work as well and as fully as human infirmities can ever do it. For years he had pursued the promise, hoping to catch up with it and have it, but he came to know long before he died, that it was not on Canaan's hills where the promise was to be fulfilled to him, but in the good and glory to be, and his faith reached up and on, and enjoyed the joy of it in anticipation.

And then it is still further said of him, that he 'was gathered to his people.' His people were the good Shemites, and the long-lived saints of ante deluvian ages—the Abels and Seths, the Enochs and Noahs, the good and true who believed as he did and walked before the Lord in the way of their duty, and in due time were taken up to their rest and reward. How hallowed it is to find oneself among kindred souls, people of similar tastes and pursuits, people one can feel at home with and whose companionship is so enjoyable and soul-satisfying! Thus it would be with Abraham when he opened his eyes in Heaven. He found himself among those he had learned to love, whose faith had stimulated and strengthened his own, and whose wise words and good works had helped him so much;—in a word, he found himself among his own people, and he was happy.

My hearer, let me ask about your people. Are they the Abels and Abrahams of the olden time, the good and true and earnest of to-day; or, are they the people of the world, the pleasure-seekers, the fortune-hunters, the careless, the godless! The people we gather to to-day, are the people we will gather to in yonder life. Let us think what sort of people we would like to spend eternity among, and let us seek to be in full accord with him.

Fourthly, His Burial. He was buried in the cave of Machpelah, side by side

with his beloved Sarah, Isaac and Ishmael being the chief mourners. Not likely since that sad day, when, as a boy of seventeen, he and his mother went out, or rather were driven out, to seek a home for themselves in the wilderness, had Ishmael and Isaac met. That was 72 years before Isaac was then only a child of two or three years, and could not remember anything about his brother. Now, a common sorrow has drawn them together, and over the dead body of their father they heal up the breach of years. They are not now young. Isaac is seventy-five, and Ishmael eighty-nine. The wild-ass man of the desert has already made himself a name, and cares for no man, as mounted on his fleet steed, or perhaps camel, at the head of a band of daring free-booters, he laughs at fear and does his will. But almost a century of years is subduing his recklessness, and sobering his vengeful passion, and there at his father's grave perhaps he catches a little of his spirit, the faith that animated him, and he may have bowed himself at his father's altar, and vowed that his father's God would be his God. I am not sure that he did, but I must say I like to see him at his father's grave. It tells me there is something good in the man.

You hint perhaps that he may have had sinister and selfish motives. And I grant that not a few come far to a funeral, and are profuse with their tears, because they have, or suppose they have, some interest in the will and the distribution of the dead man's effects. And so often the will makes trouble, causes bitter alienations among brothers and sisters, and that even when there is so little to make a scramble about. The less, the more of a scramble. But Abraham seems to have made his will before he died. He made Isaac his heir, and to him he gave the bulk of his immense wealth. To Keturah's six sons he had given generous portions and settled them in his lifetime. And to Ishmael and his mother when he had sent them away years before, he had done well—given them a good start in their wilderness-home. It does not appear, then, that there was any wrangling between Ishmael and Isaac over the property. Ishmael was probably almost as rich and great as his father was, and needed and cared for no more. And so the brothers, after the funeral, parted the best of friends, and went away each to his own widely different destiny.

Machpelah is one of the sacred places in Palestine. Over the cave stands today an old mosque, and entrance to the cave is guarded by Mohammedans with such jealous care that no one is permitted to enter. The Prince of Wales and Dean Stanley were within the mosque, but not in the cave below. It is said by some who profess to have been in the cave that Abraham's sarcophagus of beautiful white marble is still there, but the truth is, no one you can rely on has been privileged, in modern times, to see whether or not.

I have thus, my hearers, evening after evening for twelve Sabbath evenings, told you the story of Abraham's faith, and we cannot rise up from the story of such a life without being the better of it. We have seen how human he was, how like ourselves in the frailties that are not wanting to any of us, but we must go away with this impression, that, upon the whole, he was a grand man, and who towered high above the men of his own time, and was honored of God to do so much for the world. He lived close to God. He was on terms of great intimacy with him. What a revelation we have of his intimacy with God in this that the angel said previous to Sodom's doom: 'Shall I hide from Abraham that which I do?' And you see the Lord and Abraham face to face discussing the matter and deciding it. As they decide, so it comes to pass. What a friendship that Heaven reveals its secrets to, and what a faith, that can not only trust Heaven, but that Heaven can trust.

And yet the way up to all this good and glory opens at your feet and mine. It was by believing and obeying through the years that he came to be so great. It was not by a bound he reached and held his high place, but by trying and failing, and trying again. There is no mystery about the success of successful men beyond this, that they had a purpose to live for that was worthy to live for, and they lived for it with all their might. I feel that for myself, and for you, there rises a ladder whose top is lost in the unseen, and if I, and you, have patience to toil on, trusting in Jesus, and doing our work and His will, there will be for us, as for Abraham, a blessed success.

Concluded on fourth page.