

The Visitor's Pulpit.

A Library Sermon.

BY REV. T. R. STEVENS.

"Search was made in the house of the rolls."—Ezra vi.

We are gathered in this place, (the public library,) because our sanctuary is undergoing repairs. If you look outside our chapel you will see the date of its erection, 1851. Speaking generally, therefore, some twenty-eight years have elapsed since the worshippers were placed in similar circumstances to the present. Twenty-eight years; what mighty changes have occurred within that period? A marvelous picture might be drawn. A mere hint or two will remind of many. There are the intellectual. Ignorance has sustained a desperate blow, if not a death-stroke. A well-organized scheme of national education is now in full working order. "The light shineth in the darkness." There are the political. Power has passed from the few to the many; in a very real sense the governed are also the governing. Household suffrages, regarded by thousands at the beginning of the half-century as a chimera and a dream, is now the law of the land. There are the theological. Human creeds have been arraigned at the bar of public opinion, and in numerous instances an adverse sentence has followed. The decisions of ecclesiastical autoocrats are forsaken in favor of personal study of the Word of God. Dogmatism is doomed. The whole bent and drift of recent thought is in favor of the freest, fullest "private judgment" in all matters pertaining to religion. There are the spiritual. More than once a gracious tide of spiritual influence has swept over the nation, and the most hallowed results have ensued. Making allowance for the imperfections which must needs mark wide-spread popular movements of the kind, it nevertheless cannot be doubted that the evangelistic services which have so often been held have been productive of great good. Posterity will endorse the work of men like Moody and Sankey, and, judging of it by its average issues, pronounce it to have been a blessing.

Leaving Britain and thinking for a moment of the world at large, surely we cannot but marvel at what the present half-century has witnessed. When has the cause of human freedom made such rapid strides? Slavery has been attacked in its citadel and defeated. Of the three mightiest empires in existence, two have washed their hands of the foul practice. Russia has abolished serfdom, America has declared all her bondsmen free. Here, indeed, is reason for devoutest gratitude. When, also, has the kingdom of Christ been more aggressive? Missionary enterprise has proved its faith and displayed its zeal on all sides. "Great is the company of the preachers." Openings for the proclamation of the truth have presented themselves in the most unexpected quarters. Conservative Japan has flung wide her long closed gates, and the herald of the cross has not failed to enter. Rome itself is no longer a spiritual monopoly held by priests of a vast hierarchy, but the Bible itself may now be obtained and read within the very shadow of the Vatican. "What hath God wrought?"

Again, the perishable nature of all earthly things is brought home to us on an occasion like this. As already remarked, we are here because our usual place of worship is undergoing repairs. Mark that phrase. How much it means. "Undergoing repairs?" Why, when you come to reflect, you find that an accurate description of almost everything. What, we would ask, is not undergoing repairs? What, and replenishing is the great law of life. The material world is constantly undergoing repairs. Society is abnormal in a thousand and one particulars; it needs mending, and let us hope that it is undergoing repairs. Our bodies are no exception to this rule: nay, rather are they its most impressive proof. The outward man perisheth. We are told on high authority that not a single thought crosses the mind without decomposing some nerve matter. Yes, our physical organisms get dilapidated; every time you eat and drink you put your chapel under repairs. And this but for a season—a very short season. The temple cannot last forever; before long it must fall to pieces and become, as the Lotus Eaters said, "a portion and parcel of the dreadful past." Each day you and I have a hand-to-hand combat with death; we strike out at him, we dodge him, we manage one way and another to keep him from planting the fatal blow; but we all know that the contest is an unequal one,

and that in the end he will floor us. How will it be with us then? What shall we confront when he has sent us hence? Momentous questions these. May none of us blink or evade them, but look at them bravely in the face. If you have visited that memorable spot, the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey, you must have been struck with the monument to Shakespeare. There stands the great bard cunningly engraved on virgin marble; we recognize the superb dome-like forehead, tranquil countenance, and slender figure. What scroll is that which he grasps in one of his hands? Ah! mind it well. It contains the renowned, matchless passage he wrote himself, wherein he speaks of the inevitable destruction of the "cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, yea, the great globe itself." Good will it be for us if we lay often to heart the fact of our mortality, and live under its spell.

May we venture on another general remark? Our present gathering indicates our disbelief in sacred places. We who have now worshiped together several years are pretty well agreed about this. It is our conviction, decided and deliberate, that the praises as we sing here and the prayers we offer, are quite as acceptable to the Most High as if they were in our synagogue. Nor, again, do we doubt that our devotions there are quite as well-pleasing to God as they would be in St. Paul's Cathedral, or St. Peter's at Rome. Holy localities form no part of the new covenant. Our anxiety should not be about sacred spots, but about sacred thoughts, sacred emotions, sacred actions. Where did our Lord first proclaim his Messiahship? By the side of a common well. Where did Peter find out the grand fact of the Divine love to Gentiles as well as Jews? On the roof of a house. This is instructive, and we shall do well to give it prominence. Our lot is cast in a land where much importance is attached to consecrated places. Can you gain admission into a mosque? Certainly not; it is too holy a place for such an "infidel." May I enter a Hindu temple? On no account: my presence would pollute it! Nor are kindred nations wanting among some who bear the Christian name. Albeit, such sentiments are out of joint with the spirit and teachings of the New Testament.

The text speaks of "search" being "made in the house of the rolls"; that is, the house of books, the library. As you are aware volumes, with covers and leaves like ours, were unknown among the Persians and the Jews. Their literature was contained on parchments rolled on one or two pieces of wood. "The house of rolls"—what an instructive place! A library is a lesson. Even though you do not open a single book, how much is taught. If there are "Tongues in trees, books in running brooks, sermons in stones," there are certainly sermons on shelves. Addison's famous reflections in Westminster Abbey are extremely fine; some think Hervey's Meditations among the tombs profitable; nor will it be denied that the less pretentious "Wanderings" among the Alps, by Cheever, are devoid of beauty and force. And is a library less significant than an Abbey or an Alp? We think not.

Libraries show the superiority of Man. If any one asked, "How much better is a man than a sheep?" we hardly know a better reply than "the house of rolls." A man is this much better than a sheep; he can make and use a library. In some respects animals are on a par with us. Do we travel? So do they. Do we build? They can construct. Do we work? It is the same with them. Do we fight? Wars occur in their midst. Do we suffer and enjoy? They are like us. But, observe, there is a broad, plain distinction between us and them—they cannot write and read books. Elephants are sagacious, but not sagacious enough to be their own historians; swallows are swift and sure in their migrations, but they never tell us of them; beavers are fine builders, but not one of them can draw a plan; foxes are cunning but their craft is unequal to the task of describing it. Aristotle said "Man is the perfection of all animals." That is true, but it is not the whole truth; man is more and a library is a proof of it. "Ye are of more value than many sparrows." Brethren reverence yourselves. Humble yourselves by all means; fall low before a pure God, as guilty sinners should; at the same time you are bound to honour the great nature with which it has pleased Him to endow you. If some think too much of themselves, many think too little. Surely they would not live sordid, or selfish, or sensual lives, if they recollected that they were made only "a little lower than the angels."

Libraries evince our indebtedness to the

Past. A brief inquiry would be sufficient to prove the best books on yonder shelves are by men who have passed away. Far be it from me to disparage the present. We have no reason to be ashamed of some poets and scientists, theologians and novelists. Nevertheless, it may without scruple be affirmed, that most of the chief leaders of human thought belong to the bygone. No philosopher has yet eclipsed Sir Isaac Newton, and as regards the great bard who "held the mirror up to nature," we may rest well assured that his laurels will not easily be snatched away.

Yes; we owe much to yesterday. The tree grows out of the decayed foliage and wood of previous trees. As Pascal remarks, "Authors say, 'my book, my commentary, my history.' It were better for them to say 'our book, our commentary,' for generally speaking there is more in it belonging to others than to themselves." The past has made us its debtor. Will there be anything corresponding this in our experience? Will the future be under obligation to us? Our intellects are aided and blessed by men who have long since died; shall we leave precious legacy of good influences to posterity? We may; it is in the power of all. We should; it is the duty of every one. So feel and so act that the ancient words may be fulfilled in you: "Thou shalt be missed."

Libraries teach the goodness of God. What ample provision He makes for our welfare? It is but to utter a trite remark when we say that study is among the purest, noblest of enjoyments. Over a public library in Egypt the following was written: "The medicine of the soul." An apt description. Truth is the great healer; no physician so valuable. But while the analogy between a library and medicine holds good at many points, it certainly fails in one. Commonly medicines are disagreeable; though healthful they are nauseous. Not so the remedies ministered to "a mind diseased." They are frequently pleasant, and frequently delicious. Do we not often talk of "the feast of reason"? And such it is, a banquet; rare are the viands, and generous their wines! We allude frequently to "the flow of soul," and nothing causes the stream of the spirit's energies to flow forth so speedily, yet smoothly, as the Moses-like rod of knowledge. There is surely something gratifying in the associations of a place like that in which we are assembled. It refreshes one to remember the amount of innocent and genuine happiness experienced here in the course of a twelvemonth. Work over, the tradesman or the artisan finds relaxations as varied as they are beneficial. He can travel round the world with Captain Cook, or above the globe with Glashier, or under the earth with Hugh Miller or Murchison. Poetry sings to him, Fiction tells him stories, Science shows him every day miracles, History recites her strange, eventful tale, and Theology speaks to him of God, duty, eternity. Thank heaven for books! In some families it is usual to have not only "grace before meat," but "grace after meat"; should we not also have our "grace" and praise after our minds have regaled with the food of literature?

Let us now, to use the conventional phrase, give our thoughts a yet more practical turn. Recur to the verse before us. "Search was made in the house of the rolls." That word "search" may well be emphasized; there is not a little in it. Will you, for a while, turn it round, look at it on each side, and see what it suggests? "Search" is being made now in the "house of the rolls"; a most solemn search. Listen; "I, the Lord, search the hearts and try the reins of the children of men." God is searching your heart and mind. This is no mere rhetorical figure, but a sober fact. He is deeply interested in our welfare, and He looks within us. What does He see? Again, let us ask, what does He see? That He sees weakness and depravity, who denies? Of course, He beholds this; it needs little theology and less philosophy to know that we have corrupt tendencies. Our nature is warped and out of joint. The Divine eye scans all our frailty and our inclinations to evil. But that is not the question; the question is, Does he see in us wilful wrong, deliberate sin? Be honest with yourself; play no tricks with conscience; don't try to put on a mask. "Truth in the inward parts" at all costs, and if, as the result of a fearless introspection you are conscious of any evil, wage war with it, pray against it. There cannot otherwise be peace with God.

"Search was made in the house of rolls," and another "search" should be made in this "house of rolls," we mean one like that of the Bereans. You recall the incident, no doubt, for it is a very familiar one. We are told of these worthy people that

they "searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so." Here is a pattern for all Christians. Paul and Silas go to Berea and preach the Gospel. Well, that was a novelty; the Jews had never heard the like of it before. It was quite an innovation on the old theology. Some would, under the circumstances, have said, "Come, come! None of these new-fangled notions for us. Don't bring you heresies here, pray don't. Are you not perfectly well aware that there is no such thing as progress in theology? The opinions that were good for our fathers cannot be bad for their sons. Let us alone; we decline pulling up the ancient landmarks. On the whole we consider you well-meaning but dangerous persons. We don't at all deny but you are good men, but as to your views—" The Bereans went on a much better tack than that. They heard all that the Christian preachers had to say and then they went to the Book. "If their doctrine is correct, it will square with this; therefore we shall soon be able to come to a decision"; that was how they argued. The issue was, we need not add, favorable to Paul and Silas and their message.

It is for us to go and do likewise. A restless age is this. Mr. Ruskin complains that there is no reverence now. That is going too far, but certainly little is shown for many dogmas. All manner of creeds are tested, analysed, interrogated in every possible style. Such questions as the inspiration of Scripture, the second coming of Christ, the duration of future punishment, are debated with no lack of assurance. "What on earth are we to believe? Which, amid the dim voices, is the true one? Where is the court of appeal?" Where? In the Bible. "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." If any man believe, let him believe "as the oracles of God." The Most High has endowed you with a spiritual nature to which He addresses Himself in Holy Writ. Stand near the Royal Observatory in the middle of the day, and you will see a large ball fall. Time through the length and breadth of England is regulated by that ball. Theological timepieces should be set and kept in accordance with the observatory of revelation. If you want to be like the Bereans, you will not go to synods and assemblies, conferences and councils, in order to get a creed; you will go to the fountain head, namely, the New Testament.

By using your concordances you will see that "search" is a word employed in another connection. We read that Herod bade the Magi "go and search diligently for the young child." This is exactly what we want some of you to do. "What? I search for Christ as for a child, and a young child?" Yes. There is a sense in which He is still a child, and a most blessed sense it is. In the fourth chapter of the book of the Acts of the Apostles you will find them speaking of Him in prayer as "Thy Holy child Jesus." That, however, is a mistranslation; the original term is "servant." Strange as it may sound to say so, we felt sorry when we found this out. The idea underlying the word "child" is so attractive and so helpful that we would have wished the authorized version had been a correct one. Christ is still like a child. How? In gentleness, in what Spurgeon calls "approachableness." "I am meek and lowly"; patient and affectionate. Now, we want you to think of the Saviour just in that light; we want you to feel that He is always near, generous, tender and willing to help. What an inspiring thought! Yet it is not more so than true, emphatically and utterly true. It exactly corresponds with fact. We pray to realize it; regard Him as wishful only of your good, and wanting to "make you all that is mainly, noble, Christian. Have any of you come here heavy in spirit because of trade troubles? Or, are you harassed by limited means? Or, have you discomfort and discord at home? Or, are you bewildered by some perplexing theological problem? Or, worst of all, are you vexed and disheartened by a consciousness of mean, sinful, selfish tendencies within? There is One who wishes you to unburden yourself to Him. His love is a balm for every wound. Try it.

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