

SERMON

Years as Vandals and Benefactors.

By The Rev. Dr. NEWELL DWIGHT HILLIS.

Dr. Newell Dwight Hillis, in Plymouth church Sunday morning, had for his subject "The Years as Vandal and Benefactor." The text was from Ecclesiastes xi: 14—Solomon's bitterness against the years—and Psalm xc—Moses' gratitude for what the years had brought him. Dr. Hillis said:

We have here two types of character and destiny. Each man is a great man, each man was the outstanding figure of his era, both names are memorable forevermore. But how different their attitude toward their years. The one is bitter, because the years have peeled him of happiness, and made him happy because the years have blessed him with bounty. The unhappy man was Solomon, at once the wisest and saddest of men. He was born to great good fortune; but not one of them was intellect, position, fame, gold and a troop of friends. He entered the arena at a moment when the tide of fortune was at its flood. He found his country rich in undeveloped resources, and made his land a hive of industry. He found his people provincial, with an industrial wall built against outsiders; but he broke down the wall of prejudice and flung the gates wide to all the caravans of trade and commerce. Best of all, he achieved much for literature and the common people, in that he wrote songs which soldiers sang around their camp fires and hymns with which the mother soothed her child. To knowledge he gave systematic form, through the first treatise ever written on natural history. He was the first ruler to subsidize music and antedated Oliver Cromwell's gift to the grand opera by nearly thirty centuries.

But Solomon lived for himself. He was an egoist, where he should have been an altruist. He made the most of himself for his own sake, instead of making the most of himself for the sake of others. He became a Dead Sea, reflecting everything and giving nothing. He pursued knowledge that men might flatter him, because praise is sweet. He developed commerce, because he loved gold, and the luxury that trade brings. He defied his God, because he loved power. A pleasure-seeker, he lived for the eye and the physical sense; but excess dulled the edge of appetite. Not much of anything is fatal. Not enough is less injurious to the body than abundance. Soon Solomon awakened up to discover that his palate was faded, his ear dull with hearing, his eyes tired with seeing, his body weary of the titillations of food and drink, and his mind weary of the pleasures of the senses. The years seemed like vandals that had taken away his youth, his health, his hope. Time had clutch him with the clutch of the brigands, coming down from the heights of his greatness. What bitterness in the cry of vanity and vexation of spirit!

MOSES' ATTITUDE TOWARD THE YEARS.

But over against this king's bitterness, because the years have spoiled his sense of the good, stands Moses, who praises God because the years have brought him bounty and rich treasure. Strangely enough, for a time, the young king and the great pioneer, moving along parallel paths. Moses was dead, born in a slave's hut, but afterwards he passed, by one stroke, into the king's palace, there he had leisure to grow ripe, and opportunity to be a wise man. Soon his character was endued only to the chariot of the king. From every quarter came assurances that when his foster father passed on he would succeed to the throne. But conscious that he could not handle the levers of influence Moses grew more and more sober, reverent and serious. Standing on fortune's frowning slope he never forgot the pit from which he was digged. Some small matters there are that may feast without hearing the poor cry for bread. But not so Moses. One day the youth beheld a merchant whipping his own slave to death. Straightway he took his stand before the injured one, and Moses made himself to be a shield above the oppressed. That night he fled, not because he feared arrest from others, but because he feared that he could not control himself. Then the years came and went again, while he toiled as shepherd, wrought as agitator, labored for emancipation, and slowly transformed a horde of three million slaves and feeblings into something like unto a nation. One day, with his people, he approached the edge of the Promised Land. But he was at the end of his strength, just as his enterprise approached its beginning. The era of honor and reward was come, but he was unequal to the strain. Gone his youth. Gone his strength. Gone his vigor. He died for the Israelites, a truth the vandals years had spoiled him. Not that he had enriched him. In that hour he wrote his "Song of the Years," his psalm of praise, for the bounties that the summers and winters had brought him. And then he withdrew into some secret glade, that the full tide of honor and responsibility might fall on younger men. And, alone with his God, passed on.

THE YEARS SPOIL MEN OF YOUTH AND HEALTH.

Consider how the vandals years spoil men of youth and health. Both Solomon and John with his emphasis of spirituality, thought of youth as the golden age of man. These young and creative years are the years when men are in flower. Then strength, beauty, idealism, hope, self-reliance, make man as rich as Croesus. To the young heart is given the genius to create and beauty an empire. The physical force and recuperative power of youth are present treasures immeasurable. What man of sixty but recalls his college days, when beginning in the morning, he took up some great book and read straight through for twenty-four hours, unconscious of time and without thinking of food or drink. Oh, these days when recuperation is easy! When wastes can be readily replaced! Not less rich is youth in its enthusiasm. Wonderful, also, is it in its power to see the world, not in dead colors, but

in living beauty. Approaching these great hours named the departure from home, the entrance upon a profession, a trip abroad, marriage, office, a position, these moments stand forth rich in the hue of rose and overarched with the bow of hope. And this attitude of mind is logical.

THE YEARS TAKE AWAY OUR HOPE AND AMBITIONS.

The years are vandals also in that they lay waste man's hopes, his dreams and his ambitions. Somewhere Job exclaims, "All my purposes are broken." The great sage meant that he had promised himself much, while his performances were few and small. He laid the foundations of many plans, but few were carried up to roof-tree. He had a thousand ambitions for where Phidias wrought with blocks of marble, half wrought into statues, i. e. typical of all life. Men who have not fulfilled their mission go about in regrets. Many a man is conscious of the light of genius burning within, but there is no candlestick of office or position in which the light can burn. The world is full of musicians who have never been able to obtain a harp. Great thoughts surge in many minds, but the years come and go, and the tongue is dumb. Even those who have opportunity and achieve some little success are conscious that what is called their best work is a distinct failure. The oration given represents a few sentences that halt and stumble instead of golden words that march and are not only chain logic but chain lightning. The painting the artist makes is only a dab in comparison with the one of which he dreamed. The difference between the glorious fire as it burns and the ashes into which it dies is the difference between the poet's vision in the cold words that finally caught on the page.

"At last I am learning how to write and preach," wrote Charles Kingsley to Dean Stanley. But the next day the "Angel of the Years" whispered to Kingsley that he stood on the edge of discovering the great secret, and must pass on. Ah, but the great reformer and the great merchant, and the statesman, and the hero, and the mother have all learned how to do their life work when the angel of the years joins them also, and bids them make ready for the great transition! Every day man in middle life hands over to his children at least one ambition, asking his child to fulfill a hope that henceforth is denied to the father. The other day one of the United States senators published a book, in which he told of his life and his hopes and his dreams, and his ambitions.

THE YEARS TAKE AWAY OUR HONORS, OFFICES AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

The vandals years also spoil men of office and honor and responsibility, and what test of character can be more severe? Who but John the Baptist could have said: "He must increase and I must decrease." When the sun rises, through excess of light, it extinguishes the stars. But even a dead star must be conscious of sublime magnanimity in that it is willing to fade away and be forgotten in the increasing glory of the sun. It never been the case that a man has been a great leader and a great follower. It is never will be, an easy thing for a great leader to be elbowed to one side while others come in and take his place. The history of our politics holds several illustrations of this experience. Some years ago a senator from the western state was set aside. He was a man of marvelous gifts, one of the best furnished men in the senate. For many years he had held high office, and he was a man of high character. A multitude of younger men coveted his place—unequal physically to the great strain necessary to hold his own in the face of opposition, for a moment he fell out of the line. His pride was stung to the quick. During the few remaining years he walked in one vast inferno. Everywhere regret and disappointment gnawed at his heart. His profile might have served Dante in an etching of a lost soul, wandering over fields of burning marl. Disappointment ate into his heart like an acid. And yet this experience is not unusual. On every side we behold merchants who have dropped the reins of their reins, who have, through overwork, resigned their position, gifted men who stand upon one side, and have seen the great army sweep by conscious that they will henceforth have no place in the battle. Oh, what pain in these moments, when men realize that the years have spoiled them of their honors, stripped them of office, peeled them of responsibility. In the November days nature strips her leaves from the trees and forest. No matter how deeply fruited she has been, the months rob the tree of every leaf, until the oak, the peach and pear stand naked, gaunt, bare, with not a leaf as reminder of their former greatness. And this is the story of man's departed greatness.

THE YEARS TAKE OUR BEST BELOVED.

The vandals years also spoil the heart of its loved ones. Not one home escapes. Not one family goes on its way, until all can depart together. The drops of water on our lakes and rivers exhale so slowly that the invisible drops that rise into yonder clouds are hardly noticed. Slowly one by one our earth

sheds its whitest souls. To realize the uniformity and regularity of their departure go back to the old home in the country, or stand with reverent and uncovered head tonight before the city house where you were born. Our fathers, their pictures, their compasses, their youth are gone. Gone the teachers, who first lent us guidance. The whole world is changed for us. To dwell upon these losses too much would unman us. Our life seems, like the death of a dear friend takes away one more status from its niche. In contrast, it seems as if the bravest and most beautiful went on. Now can men protect themselves against these vandals years. There are no weapons that avail against the angel of death. It is given to us only to be still, and know that the Lord is God, and the citizens beloved as they go. Sometimes also we may stand beside in God's Acre, and remember, as Richter said, "God's angels enter our households. Their footprints are graves."

AN ENRICHMENT THAT IS LOSS AND POVERTY.

Nevertheless, be it contested, that for all there is a stripping that enriches, and there is an enrichment that spoils. Common looted the whole world for treasures. In the wilderness of luxury, and beauty. Nevertheless, the great king grew poorer and still poorer, until his heart cried out that all is vanity and vexation of spirit. When you stand in a college you read the history of the triumphal processions. Some victorious general returned from distant wars, bringing wagon loads of clothing, silks, furs, plate, pictures, and the like. The conqueror approached, all the citizens stood in a wilderness of luxury, and beauty. Nevertheless, the great king grew poorer and still poorer, until his heart cried out that all is vanity and vexation of spirit. When you stand in a college you read the history of the triumphal processions. Some victorious general returned from distant wars, bringing wagon loads of clothing, silks, furs, plate, pictures, and the like. 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