

G4829

ANNIVERSARY SUNDAY.

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

OCTOBER 5TH, 1873, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

[From the EASTERN POST, October 11th, 1873.]

On Sunday (October 5th) at St. George's Hall, Langham-place, the Rev. C. Voysey took his text from Nehemiah ii., 20, "The God of Heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we, his servants, will arise and build."

He said—Readers of the Bible must be familiar with the interesting book from which my text is taken, which tells the simple story of the re-building of the walls of Jerusalem after it had been almost destroyed by the Babylonian armies. The hero of this great event seems to have been singularly well fitted for his patriotic work; for he had three great gifts. He had rare tact, very high moral principle, and what we might call a desperate determination. With the first he conciliated the conquerors of his nation; with the second he kept in order and elevated the half-trained fellow-countrymen on whose exertions he depended; and with the third he fought his way over every obstacle and finished the work which God had given him to do.

But although these great gifts were natural endowments and might have rendered their possessor eminently successful in any undertaking, I believe they were heightened and enlarged by his equally remarkable faith. Though a captive in the Court of Artaxerxes, to whom he was cup-bearer, he could not forget the God of his fathers; while he was surrounded by the luxuries of a King's palace, he still remembered with shame and sorrow the daughter of Zion clad in sackcloth and sitting in ashes. As long as Jerusalem lay in ruins, there was no joy for him. As long as his countrymen were captives in a foreign land, there could be no charm for him in courtly dignity. Identifying Jerusalem with the honour of his God,

and regarding its temple as the witness of the Divine presence and rule, it was a matter of religion with him to seek its restoration, and to rebuild its ruined walls. Strong in mind and will though he was, he was not ashamed to lay his cause at the footstool of the most High, he scrupled not to pray for heavenly strength, for divine wisdom and for the success of his undertaking, but went as a little child to his Father's knee, and besought His blessing and help :—
 “ O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name, and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day.”

Having sought God's blessing and favour upon his work, he roused the enthusiasm of the Jews who still dwelt in the ruined city, and they said, “ Let us rise up and build.” “ So they strengthened their hands for this good work.” Nehemiah then goes on to describe his first encounter with opposition and how he met it. “ When Sanballat the Hōronite, and Tobiah, the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said What is this thing that ye do? Will ye rebel against the King? Then answered I and said unto to them, “ The God of heaven, he will prosper us, therefore, we his servants will arise and build.” We will not pursue the narrative further into details. It is enough to see how this brave and strong-minded man, who was the burning sun of enthusiasm to the hundreds of colder spirits around him, drew all his courage, and zeal, and hope, from his conscious dependence upon God, from his intense desire to do His will, and above all, from the assurance that “ God's thoughts towards him were thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give him an expected end.”

I cannot help feeling that this same spirit of dependence on God is the secret of whatever courage and determination have been manifested by those who are working in this age to build again the walls of a ruined Faith, and to combat the opponents on all sides who would have us rather remain in the shackles of a spiritual slavery or in the lonely wilderness of infidelity.

The gift of tact, which implies a quick discernment of other men's moods and wants, and a ready and versatile adaptation of our conduct and speech in order to win rather than to repel the unsettled inquirer, is no doubt a most needful auxiliary to such work

as ours. But tact is not everything; and this age shows, I think, a tendency to exalt this happy faculty into a virtue, and to prefer its exercise to that of the less polished but more serviceable weapon of plain speech.

The high principle which was so conspicuous in Nehemiah is the very alpha and omega of success in work like ours. Absolutely, and before all things else, it is necessary to maintain an unimpeachable honesty of word or deed, if we would hope to do the slightest good in the way of emancipating the minds of others. But this weapon of our warfare is wielded also by many of our adversaries. Let us say it thankfully, we are well-matched in this matter of integrity, and the battle would have to be drawn, if the truer views were to be decided by the greater virtue. As yet, the struggle cannot be finished on such terms alone, and our enthusiasm would perish if it were not fed from other streams.

Of all three, perhaps, a desperate determination is the most powerful human aid to success in such an enterprise as ours. Force of will we know can remove mountains, can defy and dethrone the most ancient of dynasties, can uproot the most widespread of traditions. All the great deeds for good or for evil have been done by determination, by individual energy of purpose; men once committed to a cause, holy or unholy, are rendered, by their self-consecration, dangerous to those things which they oppose. Half-hearted, luke-warm people are good for nothing but impediment; never succeed in anything but in getting in the way of the earnest, and causing an obstruction.

The Nehemiahs of the world are none of these. To have simple aims like his, to let neither himself nor friend, nor foe, ever come between him and his duty; to win and defy by turns; to slay opponents who will take no other warning, and to rebuke and chastise unfaithful or sleepy allies; to make every event, calculated or unforeseen, further the sacred end in view; to live in the hottest toil of the work, yet all aglow with delight in it; and to be ready to suffer and die for it when necessary, quite as willingly as to live and to fight for it; this is to have power—power not easily defeated not soon exhausted—power that grows by exercise and gathers force, like the descending avalanche, from the irresistible attraction which it exercises over surrounding souls.

But not even this, mighty as it is, can always conquer. Sometimes "the weak things of the world confound the things that are mighty, and things that are not will bring to naught things that are." All depends ultimately on the cause itself and not on the brave men who fight for it. It must be a cause of light, or right, or truth, or it will surely fail. It must be for the ultimate good of mankind, or it will surely come to naught. In the language of religion it must be the cause of God, and not merely a caprice of man. If this thing be of man, *i.e.*, of man's ignorance or selfishness, it will surely come to naught; but if it be of God, *i.e.*, according to His most holy and loving will; then who can overthrow it? Nay, who would be so mad as to fight against God?

Human gifts, however well-fitted, then, will not by themselves always accomplish the work on which they are expended. And those who are wise enough to perceive this fact will not rush hastily or wildly into any great undertaking relying solely on their own powers and qualifications; but they will turn it about first in their own minds to see whether it be a cause likely to benefit mankind by the increase of knowledge, of virtue, or of general happiness; to discover through these enquiries whether the great will of Heaven is for them or against them; whether, in the language of Nehemiah, God will prosper the work of their hands. I feel sure that it was with this manly deference to God's Holy Will, and reliance on His blessing, that we began our united work in this place two years ago. Not one of us would have put our hands to it, had we thought it was against God's will or to the detriment of man. Not one of us would have had the heart to begin, as we did, under such discouragements without the assurance that God approved our undertaking, and would cause it to prosper. I honestly say that I don't know what would have become of *me*, under the peculiar pressure of obligations upon most feeble powers, but for this constant and refreshing comfort of believing that our work was a little portion of God's work, and that He would make good to me those words of peace, "As thy day, so shall thy strength be."

As a society, necessarily compelled to raise funds, we have had our dark days and gloomy anticipations—not that any one of us feared for a moment that the cause of pure Theism even in this

city, not to say in the wide world, depended upon the success of this particular and comparatively insignificant movement—but we naturally contemplated, with no little sorrow, the possibility of our share in the great work passing away from us after all we had gone through to maintain it. In such hours of anxiety, and they are real though few, we know the blessedness of referring it all back to God's blessed will, and of knowing that it must prosper if it be in harmony with the eternal laws; and if it be in discord with them, well, the sooner it perish the better. Faith, then gives fresh courage and determination, as well as keeps the mind in its original integrity bent not on self-will, but supremely and entirely given to the will of God.

And observe how entirely different this is from that spirit of dogmatism which is merely faith in our own opinions. Of course we must first believe that a thing is true before we can proclaim it; and we must be persuaded of its essential value to mankind before we can incur any suffering or odium as a penalty for its proclamation. But we can feel this perfect confidence in the rectitude and value of our opinions, and yet consciously put God's will and wisdom above them all; and at the very bottom of our hearts only wish to serve Him faithfully and to declare His truth, whatever it be.

Skill, self-reliance, courage and determination are all to be elevated by the inspiration of faith, and to be refreshed and re-energated by it when wearied and discouraged.

Some, however, may say, How can you be sure that you are right? In one sense we are not sure, *i. e.*, we are not so arrogant as to be sure that God has imparted all His truth to us, and to us only; neither would we dare to say that even if God prospers our work therefore, the work of other men is wrong and against His will. But while we are thus decently modest, and confess further the impossibility of proving that we are right, we feel very very sure that we are right; so far from holding these opinions for gain, we are in many cases going against all the predilections of the past, and flying in the face of an army of hostile and cruel prejudices. Our convictions have been *forced upon us*. The soil of our minds has been under the tillage of a husbandman mightier than ourselves. Its rank foliage has been cleared and burnt, the roots of early

culture have been dug up and the sweetly seasoned ground has been sown with seeds of holy and life-giving fruit—not of our choosing. The field with its golden harvest is our own, not so the labour to which we owe its wealth. But once planted with this precious seed, we cannot reap an alien grain; nor sow again the tares which the great husbandman has burnt. Whatever grain we have to give it must be our own or none; we will not lend a borrowed word; or steal a neighbour's thought, and say, "The Lord hath spoken it." We speak only that that we do know or firmly believe, and our surety is not of ourselves; it is the gift of God. Less than this assurance will not work. Less than this degree of confidence that we are right would disqualify us for the duties we have assumed. For any one to speak of God as an hypothesis or probable theory may be justifiable in itself; but it becomes absolutely misplaced on the lips of any professed advocate of religion; the rostrum of a place of worship is not the suitable place from which to express grave doubts as to the Being and character of God. Such doubts may, of course, arise, and ought not to be suppressed; nothing honest ought to labour under disabilities of any kind; but the office of a religious teacher on religious subjects to an audience whose prayers and praises to God are just silenced, demands some degree of certainty and conviction as the *raison d'être* of the function. But there are two ways of doing everything; and it is quite possible to avoid dogmatic or dictatorial language while expressing to the full one's own earnest convictions.

It is my fervent hope that the truly religious spirit in which this work of ours was begun may never cease to animate it; if we are bearing witness in a world darkened by superstition, and likely to be still more darkened by Atheism, bearing witness of the love and friendliness of a perfect God, it becomes us both individually and collectively to live and walk by that faith which we profess, not to be ashamed of the core and kernel of those principles which we all hold so dear, and for which so many are suffering. We stand mid-way between those who have made the very name of religion a by-word and a reproach by their fables and dogmas, and those whose aversion to all religion is, therefore, insurmountable. We must neither fall into the old blunder of dogmatism, nor timidly comply with the crude and bigoted denials of a hasty Atheism. While God is to us the greatest reality of our existence, let us honestly say so, in spite of the Church's curses on the one hand, and of the world's ridicule on the other.

Finally, bear with me if I say a few words of more personal reference to ourselves. To congratulate ourselves on beginning the third year of our organization as a congregation, and to flatter one another upon our success and our prospects would be an easy and pleasant, but not very profitable occupation. To summon you and

7

all other friends to some heroic action which should excite the public admiration—always ready enough to fall before the feet of success—would be to go against the very roots of my nature, and to wither up the beauty of an action only beautiful when spontaneous. There are plenty of people agreeing with us who are able to contribute £10,000 a piece, if the time were come for it.

But I have better things to say than that such a thing had been done; better thoughts of congratulation than any degree of personal success.

We have lived and worshipped together long enough to prove what is infinitely more cheering than our own permanence and establishment. We have lived to learn that that pure Theism—that pure natural religion which is so dear to our hearts—that Faith which is the life of our souls, and the inspirer of our hope and enthusiasm, is perfectly safe now from extinction and oblivion. I can honestly say now that I don't care—speaking as your chosen minister—I don't care now whether the *Voysey Establishment Fund* sinks or swims. I do not, except as it would involve the inconvenience of seeking a new source of maintenance, care one straw whether we continue to prosper or not. Myself, aye, a hundred more like me, might go to the wall and be trodden down, as far greater men have been ere now, by the tramp of adverse circumstances; but it is too late to affect the growth and progress of that religion which was safely planted in men's hearts before I was born, and had been loudly proclaimed in this generation—yes, by some under this very roof, when I was but a boy. The little circle of workers with which we are identified as a congregation and society, thank God, is but a drop in a vast ocean of kindred souls. For every one of us, there are a hundred thousand known, and myriads unknown, who are on our side and against the falsehoods and follies of Christianity.

It is no figure of speech when I say that all over the world are human beings to whom we telegraph, as it were, our loving thoughts about God; our words fly hither and thither; are read in remotest regions, far and near; and wherever they go—they do more, far more, than convert—they awake the echoes of grateful and believing hearts who have their own joyous tale to tell of God's loving kindness, and of their birth into life. Nor is it only in distant lands, but more strange still, in churches and sects most foreign to our simple creed; on one hand the Romanist and members of all the Orthodox churches and sects, and on the other, the Unitarian, are leaving the territory of tradition, and opening their eyes to see—not what this, that, or the other man can shew them—but what God Himself has to show them. Not merely the Christian but the Hindoo also is coming under the same leaven and heaving afresh his quivering breast, always so sensitive to the Divine *afflatus*. Is

not the same spirit stirring also the Jew—the Jew whose ancestors, amid perils and difficulties a thousand times greater than our own, looked in the face of God and left incomparable record of their bliss? The Jew is fettered a little still, but the chains chafe his limbs, and he, too, is pressing on “into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”

When I think of what was the state of things more than twenty one years ago, when I began my clerical life, and glance at the successive periods of eleven, five, three, and now two years, and contrast the world's state, and its rate of progress, to-day with what these were when I first knew it, I am so abounding in hope and certainty as to the ultimate conquest of the Church's Creeds by Theism, that I could lay down my life to-day, not murmuring that I had seen so little, but thankful to overflowing that I had seen so much, of God's glorious work with the souls of men.

Once more, I say, if your hearts, like mine, are set upon this noble work, you will surely do as much as you can, and work as long as you can to help forward the little share which has been entrusted to us; but for Heaven's sake do not be afraid of the consequences, were all of us to be swept into oblivion to-morrow. Pure and natural religion has struck its roots into the hearts of men, so that no rude axes can hew it down, nor fiercest storms can root it up.

Young as I am, and dearly as I love life and its exquisite pleasures, one thought have I this day in looking back upon the past. If God were to call me home or drive me by some mischance into the wilderness once more; I should still say with old Simeon in the temple, “Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people. A Light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.”