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"AN IDEAL PARISH."

A SERMON,

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

MAY 4TH, 1873, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

[From the EASTERN POST, May 10th, 1873.]

On Sunday (May 4th) at St. George's Hall, the Rev. C. Voysey took his text from 1 Peter, iv., 11, "If any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth."

He said—At the request of some of the congregation, I will resume my discourses on the subject of the Church. In order to form a correct idea of what a Church should be, we must first consider what are the proper relations between a minister and the people to whom he ministers.

The first thing that strikes one as eminently desirable is that those relations should be made as close and as permanent as possible, short of absolute irrevocability. The parochial system, as it is called, furnishes the opportunity for such a relation better than any other which has yet been tried. A minister ought to be resident among the people to whom he ministers, and should make it his paramount duty to become personally acquainted with them, and if possible, to become their constant friend. He can do very little indeed for their advantage in the pulpit, unless he is tolerably familiar with their daily lives. Unless he knows their thoughts and sentiments by friendly converse, more than half of what he may say is like beating the air, and is sheer waste. Unless he hears their arguments against his own opinions, he and they will diverge further and further, till his influence is entirely destroyed—to say nothing of the constant strain upon his ingenuity as a preacher in selecting subjects for the pulpit, week after week, without having any clue as to what is most expedient or timely

for his hearers. Acquaintance and converse with the people is a perpetual mine of wealth for the preacher's thoughts, not only giving him a large choice of topics, but directing him to the best selection that could be made.

Important, however, as is the work in the pulpit, it is not nearly so important as the work in the parish. And if the minister's function be to build up the temple of religion and morality, and to help in raising to a higher platform the less advanced souls of his flock, that function can never be adequately fulfilled by mere preaching. He must live amongst his people, and learn to understand their feelings and sympathise with their views, and have compassion on those who are ignorant. Personal contact is the only power that one can depend upon to obtain a legitimate influence over the minds of others. We see it too often resorted to for most unworthy ends. It is an old complaint that priests have been wont to "devour widows' houses," and to "lead captive silly women laden with sins." Of such influence we can only think with indignation and shame, but what I would advocate is the *use*, instead of the *abuse*, of a power which, when wielded aright, is pregnant with beneficial results. What the minister has to do is to serve his people—to lay out his days in such help of head, or heart, or hand, as may be within his power to render. If he knows his duty and privilege, it will delight him to make friends of all his parishioners, so that in time of trouble they will send for him, as a matter of course, knowing how faithfully and efficiently he will stand by them. Such help is something infinitely more than almsgiving. That, of course, is unhappily needful at times, but the help of which I speak may be extended to persons of all ranks and conditions, till almsgiving sinks into one of the most occasional and unimportant services he has to render.

There may be places where such services are quite superfluous, but I believe I am right in saying that in nine-tenths of the parishes in England, the presence of a resident clergyman and his family is an unmixed blessing, for the loss of which not even liberation from superstition would entirely compensate. I have known clergymen who have spent the greatest part of their days in visiting their parishioners and in teaching in the village school. During their rounds, they have not only consoled the sick, and

raised the spirits of the depressed, but they have saved their parishioners from serious losses by that counsel which could only be supplied by a man of culture. How often they have to write letters for their people and explain legal documents and supply legal information. How often they have sufficient knowledge of medicine to be of invaluable service, and to win from the doctor, who had been summoned from a great distance, the welcome ejaculation "You have saved the poor fellow's life." Every day brings up some fresh want which only a minister thus placed could supply. But then to do this, he must first be known and felt to be a friend, a friend in need, a willing friend, one who does not look for any return in Easter offerings; no, nor for any return in complimentary attendance at Church; nor for any other kind of *quid pro quo*. If a man has it in him, he will soon show that he works only for love, for the sake of being useful, and not even to be well spoken of, though that is a great boon in such a position. And so when he fails, as he surely must fail sometimes, in the pulpit, to satisfy his hearers, or to come up to the standard of his own ideal, he has at least the satisfaction that his whole life is spent in their service, and one good deed is better than a thousand sermons. In spite of all the misuse that has been made of this relation of minister and people, it can assuredly be made the purest instrument of good that can be imagined. But you can only get this relation in the parochial system. Draw a line round a given area and let all the inhabitants of that area know that they have a property in the gentleman who resides among them as their minister; and let him also know that he is placed there to be their common servant; let Jews and Christians, let Catholics and Protestants, Churchmen and Dissenters, Believers and Infidels alike claim his faithful friendship and service. Let him know that it is his business not to convert them, but to be of use to them in mind, body, and estate; to help them all whenever and howsoever he can; and then, if this condition be fulfilled, you have your ideal parish, in which peace will reign, in which sectarianism and religious strife become paralysed, and in which the minister of religion is recognised as the type of perfect toleration and the best of peacemakers. Do not think this is Utopian; it has been done already and done under more eyes than mine.

It is, however, essential to the clergyman's fidelity and self-respect that he be entirely independent of his parishioners for his income. He cannot possibly preserve a strict impartiality if he be supported by the voluntary subscriptions of his flock. Those who give more money for his support would claim more of his service and concession than those who gave less. He would become the rich man's minister and the rich man's tool. The poor could not feel, as they do under the endowment system, that he was particularly their property—more *their* servant because their needs for his culture were greater. No man, however high-minded, could bear such a restraint upon his conduct as that which is involved in being the *protégé* of a wealthy parishioner who practically had the power of dismissing him.

Still there is something in the objection: What is a parish to do with an incompetent or unworthy minister? How is he to be got rid of? Well. He ought to be got rid of; and parishioners ought to have the power of preventing a well-known obnoxious clergyman being forced upon them; and after one year's trial of any minister a majority of three-fifths or three-fourths of the parishioners ought to have power to remove him. This power in reserve would be enough wholesome restraint upon lax-minded or indolent men, while it would do no injury to the self-respect of those who were good and capable.

The subject of patronage I do not here touch upon. I will now endeavour to represent what the minister and people ought to do in reference to the public ministrations of religion. Supposing them to be in the harmony which I have described, and which is much easier to achieve than is generally supposed, the minister, still keeping in mind that he is the servant of the people, will set his mind on having a service such as they, or the large majority of them, will approve. He may well be entrusted and expected to draw up the service in accordance with what he knows or guesses to be popular and within the limits of the resources of the district. He does not say, "You shall have this service whether you like it or not;" but says, "Try it for a little while, and if then you do not like it, we will alter it to meet your objections, or prepare another." If the loudest and most influential voices are inclined to be over-bearing and dictatorial, it will be his duty to plead for

minorities, and to retain or insert occasionally such forms as may be only pleasing to the few. But, if he have a grain of wisdom, he will regard the service in the Church as for the people and not for himself. He must waive his own prejudices so long as it does not involve the sacrifice of principle ; and he will remember that he is their spokesman, and not necessarily pledged to every word or sentiment that his parishioners desire him to read on their behalf.

Here, instead of a new bone of contention, would be found a new bond of friendship and mutual esteem. A minister so acting would thereby recommend his own proposals far more eloquently than by any reasoning. It would be enough for the people to know that not only they could have their own way about the service, but that *that* was the minister's sole desire. Say not, this could not be done in a parish, when it has been done where not one single parochial advantage exists. It has been done *here*, where our congregation meets from the four winds, and many members of it travel long distances, few knowing each other, and the minister labouring under the overwhelming disadvantage of only meeting them in the pulpit, and exercising not one ministerial function for them during the week. If it be both possible and easy under our circumstances, it would be infinitely more so, were we all living together in one parish.

I do not know how my brother clergymen would like what I have next to propose ? But I cannot forget that half-a-dozen persons in my late parish, who still remained my sincere friends, felt conscientiously unable to attend the parish church while I preached in it. Such a case might happen anywhere, and in some places the scruples might be very numerous ; yet it always seemed to me a hardship that even six people were kept away from the church on such grounds. Now in my ideal parish, if I were minister, I would advocate the opening of the church once at least on a Sunday to the few who could not agree with the majority, and they might have as their minister for the occasion whomsoever they would, provided always that the man chosen were blameless in moral character, and that the services were decently conducted, and not made occasions for irreverent mirth. Next to subscribing to Dissenters to enable them to build their chapels in one's own parish, I think such a step would be highly beneficial. A man

only increases tenfold his influence by toleration. He diminishes it in like proportion by every act of exclusiveness and bigotry. I once saw a whole settlement of Baptists go over to the Church because the clergyman gracefully gave way in a matter of disputed right of occupation.

I have now only to speak of the minister's function in the pulpit. I take it for granted that he is a man of ordinary tact, and possessing what is infinitely more than tact, an honest and kind heart. I have assumed that every minister should have some culture, and be morally of blameless life. These are the only conditions with which the State ought to concern itself. As to his religious views and opinions, they are exclusively his own, to hold or relinquish at pleasure. His sole claim to appointment is that he is duly qualified from a literary point of view, and that he seeks to be a minister of religion. He goes to his parish perfectly untrammelled by religious tests, 39 Articles, 3 Creeds, or Acts of Uniformity. He is not bound to take any man, or any number of men, as his guide or model. He is perfectly free. All that is expected of him is that he will be faithful—true to himself, and to his own convictions. Being a man among men, it will be only natural for him to be tentative at first, and not shock and alienate the strangers who gather round to hear his earliest discourses. He will find out by gentle means how much the people agree with him and how far they differ, so that he may give attention to those points where reconciliation is attainable by persuasion or amplification. He will soon discover whether he can lead them on, or whether he is altogether unfit for their present stage of thought. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, such a minister's work will be easy from the first, and crowned at last by the hearty concurrence of his parishioners. But this is the only limitation he will put upon his own perfect freedom; the only ground on which he will tolerate in himself the slightest reticence. His grand aim will be to declare unto them "the whole Counsel of God," as it appears to him; and not to keep back "one word of God's truth from the great congregation." He has no excuse now for evasion or subtlety, or that most miserable and fashionable of expedients, the knocking to pieces of some orthodox doctrine, and then saying, "I believe in it for all that." He has no ground for

hesitation. The people expect honesty from his lips, not things merely smooth and agreeable. They only bind him by tacit agreement to be true to himself, and not to deceive them by ambiguous speech, or hide his honest thought under a cloud of controversial dust. This, of itself, would be a great attraction. I know of the preaching of a heretic that was attended by some of his parishioners who could not bear his doctrine, and when asked why they continued to go to church to hear him, said, "Well, he always speaks his mind, and says we are not obliged to think as he does." Indeed it would be life from the dead in our English churches and chapels if the word were to go forth that everywhere on a certain Sunday, the ministers, without fear of pains, penalties, or social stigma, would really preach what they honestly believed. It would be such a day of Pentecost for thought and religious earnestness as the world has never yet seen.

I know I am speaking the sober truth when I affirm that though there are many earnest and true-hearted men of every shade of religious opinion, who invariably say what they think to be true, are yet undistinguishable from the mass around them, who preach doctrines cut and dried for them, and shun original thought or speech as they would the plague. How can you tell whether a man be true to himself or not, if all are tethered with the same length of rope and must not transgress certain limits. Go to St. Pauls, or to Westminster, or to our Chapels Royal, or anywhere you please, and distinguish the honest men from the dishonest if you can. They are there sure enough, but you cannot test them. They are bound up in one bundle with the insincere and the indifferent. In the interest of all religious opinions whatever, it is absolutely needful to have no prohibition on the expression of honest opinion. Without that liberty you cannot be sure that the Protestant is not a Catholic, the Catholic an Infidel, the Evangelical a Rationalist. It is in the power of any Sunday School boy to say of every preacher thus tied and bound—"Ah! he did not dare say what he believes."

While we are yet ignorant, we need the fullest variety of opinion. Such differences are blessings, not curses, till the true science of God shall come. And we ought to welcome honest speech, however distasteful its arguments and conclusions, however seemingly

dangerous to order and morality, simply because it is honest, and is the deeply rooted conviction of another man's mind. More than this, I believe the honest utterance of opinions one does not like, does a great deal more good than the flattering repetition of sentiments already adopted.

For the present I close with this remark. The ideal parish which I have endeavoured to draw, is based upon the principles of Love, Liberty, and Truth. In sad contrast to these, the churches, as history tells us, are worked by hatred, intolerance, slavery, and falsehood—falsehood clung to after it had been detected and exposed. Shall not the Church of the Future learn a lesson by the shame brought upon the Church of the past, and cast away her idols of Dogma, Sacerdotalism, and so-called Uniformity to the moles and to the bats?

