

SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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SERMON XIV.

THE BURIAL OF CHRIST.

ST. JOHN xix. 41, 42.

Now in the place where he was crucified, there was a garden; and in the garden, a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid: there laid they Jesus.

OF all the scenes of common life, there is none so affecting and instructive, as the funeral of a friend. It generally constrains the soul to feel, and sometimes lodges in it a spirit of thoughtfulness and prayer, which leads it to its God.

To such a scene the words of the text invite us. They call us to the funeral of one, to whom we are indebted for all the comforts we enjoy in the present life, and for all our hopes of blessedness in the life to come. In endeavouring to derive instruction from it, let us consider, first, some of the circumstances attending the burial of Christ; secondly, the reasons why he was buried; and, thirdly, the effects which a contemplation of his tomb should produce.

And who, brethren, will turn away from such a funeral as this? When heroes die, assembled multitudes follow them to their graves; and when a beloved monarch goes to his last home, thousands gather round his tomb, and a mourning nation testifies its grief. Shall the Saviour of the world then, he who triumphed and bled for unnumbered millions, have no one among us to lament his death? Shall the King of Zion be carried to his sepulchre, and we pass by unconcerned, heedless of the voice which cries to us, "Come, see the place where the Lord lies?"

I. 1. Among the many interesting *circumstances attending his burial*, let us look, first, at *the persons who are bearing the blessed Jesus to his tomb*. And who are they? The disciples who lay in his bosom and whom his bounty fed? the beloved John, the pardoned Peter? In the very first hour of his suffering, these "all forsook him and fled and now he is dead, they leave his body to be mourned over and buried by others. But though, in the hour of need, they desert us, who ought to be the first to minister to our necessities, yet we must not despair of aid. "The Lord will provide," and will send us the mercies we require by other hands, and perhaps by the hands of those who seem but little likely to do us service. Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, and Joseph of Arimathea, who were both afraid to acknowledge the Saviour when he was working miracles and manifesting his greatness, now, when his glory appears all departed, are forward to avow their attachment to him, and

fearless in testifying their love. One goes boldly unto Pilate, and from him to the cross, and takes down the body of Jesus; the other brings costly spices to embalm it; and both, in company with a few faithful women, lay him in his grave. Let not the strong then boast themselves over the weak, for in the hour of trial “the strong may be as tow,” which a spark, the veriest trifle, can destroy; while “the feeble shall be as David,” bold as a lion and firm as the cedar of Lebanon.

2. We may notice also *the time in which Jesus was interred*. It was in the evening, the evening before the sabbath on which the feast of the passover was celebrated, and consequently a season of peculiar devotion. It was “the Jews’ preparation day,” and the people were now attending the service of the temple; but Joseph and Nicodemus were not among them. They left them to perform a necessary act of charity and love. Could it have been delayed, their conduct would have been criminal, but it admitted of no delay, and they offered to God a more acceptable service than prayers and sacrifice, in hastening to perform it.

But let no one dare to infer from their example, that the public ordinances of religion, or the private exercises of devotion, may rashly be neglected for more active duties. These mourners buried the Saviour while others were worshipping, but they buried him in haste, and then “rested the sabbath day according to the commandment.” All their love for him could not bring them to his tomb till the sabbath was ended, and then “early, when it was yet dark,” the impatient women came again unto the sepulchre to indulge their grief. Thus did they manifest the ardour of their affection, and at the same time admonish us, that we are bound to suppress the strongest and noblest feelings of our nature, rather than violate the command of God.

3. But let us look at *the place where the Lord was interred*. It was in a garden, a garden on the very hill on which he was crucified. No dishonour however was designed in burying him in such a place, for among the eastern nations, gardens were often made use of as places of interment. And on this occasion there was a peculiar propriety in laying the Saviour there. It was right that the place where he suffered the greatest ignominy, should be the first scene of his glory; that he should triumph over death on that very hill, on which he submitted for a season to his power.

His sepulchre, we are told, was “a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid.” This was a necessary precaution, for if any other had been laid in the tomb before him, his enemies might have tarnished the glory of his resurrection, by pretending that it was some other body, and not his own, which was raised out of it.

It was also “hewn out in a rock,” and a great stone was rolled to the door of it, and afterwards sealed. Here also may be discerned the superintending providence of God. A body could not be hastily removed from such a

sepulchre by a subterraneous passage, and had the disciples really formed a project to remove it, the Roman guards would have prevented them from entering it in front; at least, they could not have entered it unperceived.

Here then a few sorrowful friends entombed the mangled body of Jesus; and left him in a sepulchre, whom they had expected to see on a throne. And who that contemplates this scene, can refrain from wondering at *the depth of the Saviour's humiliation?*

He who is here brought to the dust of death, is none other than the Prince of life, that everlasting Prince who holds in his hand "the keys of hell and of death," and in whom we all "live, and move, and have our being." Before he appeared among us, he sat on the same throne with the Lord almighty; yea, "he was with God and was God;" and yet "he humbled himself, took on him the form of a servant," spent his days in an accursed world, in poverty and contempt, amidst pollution which his soul abhorred; and at length laid himself down in a grave, and that not his own grave, but one provided for him by the charity of another. Among all the strange vicissitudes of which the earth has been the theatre, when was such a change as this ever witnessed, or such an abasement heard of? Were but half its mysteries of love and condescension known to us, how should we wonder and adore!

The circumstances attending our Lord's burial may teach us also, that *the decent solemnities of a funeral are not displeasing to God.* The blessed Jesus was an enemy to pomp; all he said and did during his life, was directly opposed to it; but still his body was carried to the tomb with some degree of ceremony, and he was followed thither by all the friends who had courage to attend him. We may safely infer therefore, that we ought not rashly to condemn all funeral solemnities. There is a respect due to the body of a Christian, as the temple wherein God has been served and honoured. It is designed to be rebuilt in another world, and it ought not to be cast away like common dust in this. Accordingly we read in scripture of many mournful and solemn funerals; such also were often seen in the primitive church, and such, in the days that are past, were frequent in our own land. Our fathers accompanied their fathers weeping to the grave, and felt a melancholy pleasure in following them as far as they could follow them. But these decencies are now rapidly passing away; and what have we instead of them? An unmeaning pomp, an almost ludicrous pantomime of grief, exciting at once our pity and disgust. Relatives and friends are now far off, and hired mourners supply their place. And whence does this change proceed? From irreligion, brethren; from an increasing aversion to every thing serious; from a greater dread of death and judgment. But death and judgment are as certain as ever, and are drawing near as rapidly. Why then should we wish them to come upon us unawares? Let us accustom ourselves to think of them; and that we may think of them, let us not turn away from the graves that are opened for our kindred. Let us

see them decently interred in their beds of dust, and endeavour to derive from the scene all the instruction it affords. Let us not sacrifice affection to fashion, nor exchange the decent customs of the wise and good in past ages, for the unfeeling innovations of the proud and foolish in this.

II. Such were the principal circumstances attending the burial of Christ; but *why was he thus buried?*

It seems on the first view unnecessary that he should have had any funeral or grave. In three days his body was again to be raised to life, and during this short interval, it could have remained in the habitation of Joseph, as safely as in his sepulchre. But it was the will of God that it should be committed to the earth, and we are warranted to conclude that some important ends were designed to be accomplished by its interment.

1. One of these undoubtedly was that *the prophecies concerning the Messiah should be fulfilled*. So minute and precise were these prophecies, that they not only foretold his incarnation, his passion, and the glorious resurrection which was to follow, but also his burial, and the mode and continuance of it. His abode in the heart of the earth was prefigured by Jonah's abode three days and three nights within the whale; and Isaiah had expressly declared concerning him, that when he should be "*cut off* out of the land of the living," he should "*make his grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death.*"

But how are these prophecies to be fulfilled? The Roman law under which the Saviour suffered, allowed no interment to those who died on the cross; and lest any pitying hand should take their bodies from the tree and cover them with earth, a guard was usually stationed for several days around them. We are accordingly told by Saint Matthew, that the centurion and they that were with him, still remained at Calvary, "*watching Jesus,*" after he had given up the ghost. And even if this difficulty could be surmounted, there was another still to be overcome before he could have an honourable interment. The Jews had a public place of burial for all those who suffered as criminals, and if any interment were allowed to Jesus by the Romans, this pit appeared to be the only grave in which his countrymen would allow his dust to rest. But what are difficulties and obstacles in the way of an almighty God? He caused the Jews themselves, the very people who crucified his Son, to prepare the way for the fulfilment of the prophecies which proved his divinity and condemned their unbelief. Their law required that malefactors should be buried on the day of their execution, and to prevent their city from being ceremonially unclean on the succeeding sabbath, they besought Pilate that the sufferings of the expiring criminals might be terminated, and their bodies taken down. Pilate granted their request, and no sooner was it granted, than the rich and honourable Joseph comes forward to rescue the breathless

Saviour from the hands of his enemies, and to lay him in his own tomb. What infinite wisdom foretold, infinite power accomplished. A mighty God never wants means and instruments to fulfil his purposes. When he stretches forth his arm, he causes darkness to be “light before him, and crooked things straight.” Surveying the countless hosts of his creatures, he often passes by those whom we expect to be employed in his service, and singles out other instruments to perform his will, and such as will perform it with the greatest glory to himself, and the greatest benefit to his church.

2. Another probable reason why the Saviour was buried, was *to prove the reality of his death*, that no doubt might afterwards remain of his resurrection from the dead. Had he been restored to life on the cross, or while his body was in the possession of his friends, it might have been said that he had never really died; that though life appeared to be extinct within him, the vital principle still remained; but by his interment, all such insinuations were guarded against. His enemies, who were anxious to prevent all imposition, gave his body to his friends to be interred; and his friends, who would not surely have buried alive one whom they so much loved, wrapped him in a winding-sheet, and enclosed him in a tomb.

3. The interment of Christ might also be designed to answer a further end—*to comfort his people in the prospect of death*.

It is no easy thing to think without fear of being laid in the grave and encircled with a shroud. We shrink from the silence and darkness of the tomb, and need some special source of comfort to support our trembling steps in our passage to it. Now Christ, by voluntarily going down to the grave, has cheered the way which leads to it. He has explored the mansion in which we are about to dwell, and disarmed within it him who once clothed it with terrors. He tells us now to fear no longer its loneliness and gloom; to tremble no more at the prospect of that which could not harm him, and which he will take care shall never injure us; to venture securely where he has gone unhurt before. He bids us mark his footsteps as we descend the path which leads us to the tomb, and be content to lie down in it as a place of peaceful rest, till the morning of the resurrection dawns. When we forget him, the region of death is a land of darkness as darkness itself, covered with impenetrable clouds, and appalling with mysterious horrors; but when the Christian beholds his Redeemer entering it as his forerunner, and passing through it in triumph to a world of light, he no longer heeds its dreariness. His language now is, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” “True, I must die; but my dying Lord has conquered death and robbed him of his sting. It is true also that I must lie down in the grave; but I shall enter into peace when I rest on the bed provided for me there, for there has my Saviour lain, and left behind him security and quiet. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for he who has never yet forsaken

me in all my wanderings, will be with me there. His rod and his staff, which have so often upheld my goings, they shall comfort me.”

III. Let us now proceed to enquire, thirdly, what are *the effects which a contemplation of the Saviour’s tomb should produce on us*. And in order to answer this enquiry, let us bring to our remembrance one of those scenes of sorrow, through which most of us have passed, and endeavour to retrace some of the feelings we have experienced under the loss of a beloved friend.

1. One of the strongest of these feelings is often *a penitential sorrow for all the injuries we have done him and all the pain we have given him*. Every act of unkindness towards him is remembered, and every impatient word lamented. And has the buried Jesus received no injuries at our hands, and endured no pain on our account? Alas, brethren, all he ever endured was inflicted by us. We stripped him of his glory, and robbed him of his happiness. Our sins made him a man of sorrows; and when he was stricken and afflicted, we sharpened his anguish by hiding our faces from him, despising and rejecting him. It was our guilt which laid him prostrate in the garden, scourged him and crowned him with thorns, wounded and bruised him on the cross, and gave him in exchange for the brightness of heaven, the gloominess of the grave. O let us look on him whom we have pierced, and mourn! Let us remember how often and how deeply we have put him to grief. Let us think of his anguish at Gethsemane, of the indignities he endured at Golgotha, of the unknown horrors of his soul at Calvary; and deplore with contrition and tears the injuries we cannot recompense.

2. Another effect to which the death of a friend gives rise, is a feeling of *joy that his sufferings are past and his happiness begun*. We mourn over his grave, but we remember that there the weary are at rest, and we are comforted. We lift up our eyes to the world whither he is gone, and as we listen to the voice from heaven, which says, “Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord,” we sometimes lose our sorrow in the contemplation of his blessedness.

And shall we not rejoice at the grave of the departed Jesus? Bitter indeed were his sufferings; never was any sorrow like unto his sorrow; but the days of his mourning are ended. He will “hunger no more, neither thirst any more.” His weariness and painfulness, his watchings and fastings, are all past, and all his shame and anguish are ceased for ever. The wicked will trouble him no more; no more will his friends desert, or his Father forsake him. The sorrows of death will never again compass him, nor the pains of hell get hold upon him. “Being raised from the dead, he dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him; for in that he died, he died unto sin once; but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God.” The battle is fought; the victory is won; and the Conqueror has entered into his rest, and encircled himself with

his glory. And what heart can conceive aright of the sweetness of his rest, or the brightness of his glory? The prospect of it supported and cheered him during all his sufferings upon earth, and when he left it, he told his disciples to think of it and rejoice. “Ye have heard,” said he, “how I said unto you I go away. If ye loved me, ye would rejoice because I said, I go unto the Father.” And has this much longed for, this dearly purchased joy disappointed him? No. “He sees of the travail of his soul and is satisfied.” He rejoices in the fruits of his labours, and almost forgets the agonies of his cross in the glories of his crown; the terrors of the conflict in the splendours of his triumph.

3. And what effect ought the contemplation of his blessedness to produce in us? It ought to excite in us *an earnest desire to be where he is and to behold his glory.*

Those among us, who have friends in heaven, tenderly cherish the hope of meeting them again. We know that for the present they are lost to us, but we know also that they are not lost to us for ever; that though they cannot return to us, yet we shall go to them, and share again their friendship and their joys. And what was the language of the dying Jesus to his sorrowful friends? “Let not your heart be troubled. Ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there ye may be also.” And what is the description which he has given us of the friends, whom he has left for a season behind him in the world? They are men who are “waiting for him from heaven having their conversation there, because from thence they are looking for the Saviour; seeking those things which are above, because he is sitting above at the right hand of God. They are men who cannot be happy till they are where he is, till they see him face to face, and behold his glory. And they shall see his face and behold his glory. He is as desirous of having them with him in his kingdom, as they are to be there, and he will soon come and fetch them home to himself. He will raise them up at the last day, and lead them in exultation to the mansions and thrones prepared for them. Then indeed will there be joy in heaven, such joy as never yet has gladdened its bright abodes. The morning stars will sing together more sweetly than when the foundations of the earth were laid, and the sons of God shout more triumphantly for joy.

4. There is one feeling more which the burial of Christ ought to excite—a feeling of *the deepest anxiety to be prepared for our own latter end.*

Where the body of Jesus went, there also must our bodies go. We are all the heirs of the grave, and when a few more years have passed away, we shall all have entered on our inheritance, and taken a shroud for our garment and a coffin for our home. Our souls too must go into that invisible, that untried and unknown world, whither the spirit of our Lord went. They must enter

eternity, and take up in it their everlasting abode. Are we then ready for this journey? Are we willing to have our bodies carried to the grave, and our souls ushered into a world of spirits? Are we, in short, prepared to meet our God? Are our sins pardoned? Is the wrath to come escaped? Is an interest in Christ secured? Is the great business of life done? O brethren, how trifling are all the enquiries which employ and agitate our minds, when compared with such questions as these! And how are we to answer them? Only by looking into our hearts, and asking others. Are we buried with Christ? Are we striving to be “made conformable unto his death?” Are we crucified to the world? Are we dead unto sin? Are we living unto God? As though we were already laid in our graves, are we striving to keep our minds unaffected by the vanities of life, and undisturbed by its cares? Are we dying daily? These are the questions which we should press home to our hearts as we stand at the tomb of Christ; and these are the things which will enable us to go down to our own tombs in peace and hope. They cannot indeed blot out our sins—the holiness of an angel, were it ours, could not atone for the least of our transgressions—but they are evidences that the blood of Christ has cleansed us, that his Spirit is sanctifying us, that heaven is prepared for us, that when “he who is our life, shall appear, we also shall appear with him in glory.”