SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

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BY

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THE NINTH EDITION.

VOL. I.

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LONDON: :

PRINTED FOR HAMILTON, ADAMS, AND CO.

PATERNOSTER-ROW.

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1833.

SERMON VI.

THE NEWS OF CHRIST’S RESURRECTION SENT TO PETER.

St. Mark xvi. 7.

*Go your way; tell his disciples and Peter, that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him.*

In the history which the Holy Spirit has given us of the life of Christ, there are many circum­stances related, which appear, on the first view, to be altogether unimportant. We consider them as not designed to convey to us any instruction, and pass them over as too trifling to occupy our attention. Here however we err. The Lord Jesus Christ never uttered one unmeaning saying; there is not a single action of his life recorded in the scriptures, which is not of some importance to us, and which may not furnish us with a useful lesson. We may apply this remark to the words before us.

On the third day after the crucifixion of Jesus, three faithful women came to his sepulchre, with the design of shedding their last tear over his remains, and of paying to them the last kind offices of love. The Saviour however had left the tomb, and as the women were entering it with mingled sensations of surprise, doubt, and joy, an angel appears to them, tells them that their beloved Master was risen, and commands them to carry the joyful tidings to his comfortless disciples. But in the command that was given them, we find one disciple singled out from the rest; “Tell his disciples and Peter.” Now this circumstance may appear at first to be hardly worth a moment’s consideration; but let us not make light of it; let us rather attentively consider it, and entreat the Spirit of God to make it the means of imparting instruction to us.

In directing your attention to this circumstance, I purpose to consider, first, the person to whom the message in the text was particularly sent; secondly, the Being who sent it; and, thirdly, the messengers who were the bearers of it.

I. *To whom was this message particularly sent?* To Peter.

And who was Peter, that he should be thus singled out from among the disciples? By what was he distinguished from the other ten, that he should be thus honoured? We know that at the period when he received this message, he was distinguished from them by a pre-eminence, not in merit, but in guilt. But two days before, he had denied his Master, when his Master was about to die for him. “All the disciples forsook him and fled,” but Peter went farther, and added the guilt of falsehood, curses, and oaths, to the base­ness of desertion. His sin was of the first magni­tude, of a crimson die. It had too this peculiar aggravation, that it brought a scandal on the church, when the church seemed least able to bear it. The Shepherd was smitten, the sheep were scattered; and this was the season in which Peter dishonoured his Lord, and denied his con­nection with his persecuted followers.

This then was the man to whom the risen Jesus specially directed his angel to send this joyful message. Had the faithful John who adhered to him in his sufferings and stood by his cross, been thus singled out, it might have excited no surprise; but for Peter, the treacherous Peter, to be thus honoured, seems indeed mysterious. Who can fathom the depth of the Saviour’s love? Who can measure his unbounded grace?

Was Peter singled out then on account of his peculiar guilt? God forbid. Never let us at­tempt to magnify the grace of God by making that abominable thing which he hates, a recommendation to his favour. It is true that he is ready to pardon the greatest, the vilest sinner who really seeks his pardon; it is true that he has sometimes shown the riches of his grace by making a heinous sinner a holy saint; but are we therefore to “sin that grace may abound?” Does the greatness of the sinner’s guilt plead with the greatness of divine mercy? Never. Sin may draw down vengeance from heaven on a trans­gressor’s head, but never has it drawn down mercy and grace.

Why then, it may again be asked, was Peter thus distinguished and honoured? We have hi­therto taken only a partial view of his conduct; let us more closely examine it.

Peter was not only a great and scandalous sinner, he was also a penitent, mourning sinner. Scarcely had he denied Jesus in the hall of Pilate, when a look of love and pity from his injured Master melted his heart, and filled him with the deepest sorrow. We do not see him trifling with sin, making light of his transgression, and at­tempting to excuse or palliate it. We do not find him comforting himself with the thought that he was a disciple of Christ, and therefore might sin without fear; that though a heinous transgressor, he was a child of God, and could not be finally cast away. We see in him nothing but self-loathing and contrition, sorrow and tears. Saint Matthew says that “he went out and wept bitterly and Clement, an ancient Christian writer, relates, that throughout all his future days, every morning when he heard the cock crow, he fell down on his knees; and, with tears streaming from his eyes, supplicated pardon for his dreadful sin.

Here then we see that it was not the guilty Peter who was thus honoured; it was the sor­rowful, contrite Peter. It was not his cursing and oaths, which brought this mercy to him, but his penitence and tears. There is no comfort then in this scripture for the careless, hardened sinner; no comfort for the self-righteous sinner; no com­fort for the man who, in the midst of his iniquity, feels no self-abhorrence, no deep contrition, for his guilt. There is no comfort for such characters as these; but there is the sweetest comfort for the broken-hearted transgressor. If there be such a sinner here, may God, the Holy Spirit, enable him to derive peace and hope from this instance of his Saviour’s love! May he “draw water with joy” out of this well of consolation!

II. That those among us who are thus mourn­ing for sin, may be cheered and strengthened, let us proceed to consider, secondly, the Author of this message, *the gracious Being who sent it to this fallen disciple.*

We are told that it was brought to the women by an angel; but he brought it from Jesus, the risen Jesus, the same Jesus who is now seated on the throne of the universe, and who will one day come in the clouds of heaven to be our Judge.

1. Such a message under such circumstances may teach us, first, that *Christ had just the same compassionate heart after his resurrection, that he had before it.* Death changed the na­ture of his body; the corruptible temple was made an incorruptible building; but death did not make the least change in his heart; it did not alter the dispositions of his soul. We saw him before his crucifixion weeping at the tomb of La­zarus, and shedding tears over the impending mi­series of Jerusalem; and now after his resurrection from the dead, we see that his first concern is not to receive the congratulations of his friends or to put to shame the boasting of his enemies, but to dry the tears of a fallen disciple, and to speak peace to his troubled mind.

Here then every spiritually-minded Christian may find a spring of consolation. Jesus, my Sa­viour, he who measures out to me my daily por­tion of sickness and of health, of sorrows and of joys; he who is ever appearing as my Advocate at the throne of my God—this Jesus has the same pitying heart in heaven, that he had on earth. He can still enter as deeply into all the workings of my fearful, fainting soul. He is still touched with the feeling of my infirmities. He still looks on the people who seek him, with the same tender­ness, sympathy, and love.

2. The message sent to Peter shows us, se­condly, that *the risen Jesus looks more on the graces, than on the sins of the penitent Christian.* He seems to have thought more of Peter’s sorrow, than of his curses; more of his tears, than of his oaths.

Thus too did he act towards his servant Job. We read the history of his life, and we see it stained with much that is evil. Complicated as his sufferings were, and great as was the submis­sion which he manifested under them, we are at seasons almost disposed to condemn him for his murmurings, rather than to admire him for his patience. And yet we do not find God condemn­ing this man. He calls him “a perfect and an upright man and when his friends impeach his integrity, he descends in a whirlwind from hea­ven to reprove their injustice, and to vindicate the character of his servant. After the lapse of a thousand years, we find him exercising the same tender mercy towards this sorrowful saint. He calls upon us by his apostle James to remember “the patience of Job,” while he says not a word of his impatience, his murmurings and complaints.

We know not indeed how a Being of infinite purity can thus look with delight on anything which he finds in any sinner’s heart; but the scripture repeatedly tells us, that though they are sinners, “the Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy;” that the Redeemer is satisfied with “the travail of his soul;” that he delights in the graces of his church, and greatly desires her beauty. The reason may be, that he sees so much of the desperate wicked­ness of our hearts, as to make him contemplate with pleasure the least good his grace enables us to bring forth. The natural barrenness of the soil may lead him to admire the fruit it produces. Who would not value a flower which he should find blooming on a rock, or throwing its fragrance over the sands of a desert?

Though we cannot comprehend all the riches of Jehovah’s love, we may however believe the plain declarations of his word. He tells us there, that “a book of remembrance is written before him for them that fear him, and that think upon his name.” He tells us too, that though he does not remember the sins of his people, he records in this book all their graces; that there is not a de­sire in the heart of the humble, which he does not regard; that he sees the tears of the contrite, and treasures them up as though they were precious pearls; that they cannot give even a cup of cold water to one of his children, but he lays up for them a reward. While he sees such things as these in his people, he will not cast them away on account of the sinful infirmities which still cleave to them. He will not despise the gold, because it is not wholly purified from the dross. He will not burn the wheat, because it is still mixed with the chaff.

Are we then to conclude that God sees no sin in his people, or that, seeing their sin, he is not displeased by it? Are we to suppose that he is an indifferent spectator of their transgressions, or become altogether blind to them? God forbid. Such a conclusion would militate against some of the plainest declarations of his word, as well as against the whole course of his dealings with his church. It would impeach the perfection of his divine nature, his unalterable omniscience and his infinite holiness. If there could be sin in one of his creatures, and he not see it; if there could be sin in any part of the universe, and he not be dis­pleased at it; he would cease to be the God of the Bible, and we should be without a revelation of his will. Both his word and providence would be alike a riddle. O could the afflicted Jacob, the mourning David, the dying Moses, or the weeping Peter, hear some modern professors of the gospel speak of that bitter thing which planted so many stings in their hearts, and drew down so many sorrows on their heads; how would they wonder and tremble! They would tell us, in opposition to all the cunningly devised systems of man, that none of the sins of his people pass unnoticed by God, no, nor yet unpunished; that although he may show himself unbounded in mercy towards them, he will make them feel that he is a holy Saviour, and force the world to see that he hates their iniquities.

A jealous God, brethren, has ever visited the transgressions of his children with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Thus has it been in every age and with every member of his church, and thus it was in the instance before us. Christ sends to Peter a message of comfort; but did he suffer his sin to pass unnoticed or un­punished? No; he has recorded it to his everlast­ing shame in his holy word. Even to this very day, wherever his gospel is preached throughout the whole world, there also the treachery of his disciple is published. The sin is forgiven, but the remembrance and the shame of it still re­main.

3. We may observe, further, that *Jesus some­times vouchsafes to the believer when bowed down with extraordinary sorrow, more than ordinary comfort.* He who is the Comforter of his church, singles him out as the particular object of his grace, and stoops down from heaven to bind up his broken heart. A joyful message is sent to all the sorrowful disciples, but Peter is peculiarly a mourner, and he receives from his Master a special and more personal message of joy. Such a message seemed necessary to restore him to his former peace. It is not a light thing, that will quiet the conscience of the Christian, after he has been overcome by temptation. The storm which sin occasions in his soul, cannot easily be soothed into a calm. The wells of salvation, from which he had before drawn water with joy, seem now to be utterly empty, or barred up against him; all the common means of comfort have lost their power; and the mourning Christian wants some special interposition of grace and mercy, before he can again cherish in his heart a hope of pardon and acceptance.

In the mysterious riches of his goodness, the Lord sometimes vouchsafes to his saints, in these seasons, peculiar consolations. He recalls their soul, “tossed with tempest and not comforted,” from the contemplation of its own depravity, and tells it to look again with the eye of faith on the cross of his Son. In the midst of their sighing and tears, he leads them to their Saviour, enables them to cast on him the heavy burden of their sin, and leaves them rejoicing in his salvation. He does not indeed hastily chase away their sorrows; they are often left to feel much of the bitterness of their sin, and to mourn long over its shame; but, in the end, the darkness which transgression has spread over their souls, is generally dispersed; the day-star arises in their hearts, and the night of their mourning is ended. Year after year the fallen David had his sin ever before him, and watered his couch with his tears; and yet a God of pardoning mercy met him at length, and brought peace to his soul. These were the last words of David, the son of Jesse, “Although my house be not so with God, yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure; for this is all my salvation and all my desire.”

4. By sending to his fallen disciple this mes­sage, Jesus reminds us also, that *the contrite sin­ner may draw much comfort and hope from his resurrection.*

What was the joyful message that he sent to Peter? It was this, that he was risen from the dead. Peter also, in the first chapter of his first epistle, seems to make a distant allusion to the means by which his heart was restored to its wont­ed peace. “Blessed,” says he, “be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which, according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” This too was the saluta­tion with which the primitive Christians cheered each other under their sufferings; on the morn­ing of every sabbath, these joyful words were heard in their assemblies from every mouth. “The Lord is risen.”

How is it then, brethren, that we draw so little comfort from a fountain, from which these early saints drew so much? The great reason is, we do not go for it there; we do not endeavour to know the power of the Saviour’s resurrection; we do not understand its importance, or feel its efficacy. If it were duly considered by us, properly un­derstood, and effectually applied by the Holy Spirit to our minds, we should see that it is able to cheer the most dejected soul, and to put life and spirit into the faintest heart.

III. Let us now take a hasty view of *the mes­sengers who were employed to bear this message.*

1. It was entrusted first to *an angel.* Saint Mark describes him as “a young man,” but Saint Matthew calls him “the angel of the Lord.”

But why should an angel be called on to carry such a message as this? The feet of the hum­blest messenger with these glad tidings of good would have appeared beautiful upon the moun­tains, and would have been hailed with acclama­tions of joy. It pleased Jesus however to entrust the news of his resurrection to a heavenly mes­senger. He had heard the multitude of his heavenly hosts exulting with joy, when they were allowed to make known his birth to the wonder­ing shepherds; he had experienced their sym­pathy in the wilderness, in the garden, and pro­bably on the cross; and now he singles out one from their number to proclaim his triumph over death and the grave. Neither was it a common angel, that he chose; it was “the angel of the Lord,” his own angel, the highest and most fa­voured archangel in his courts.

Mark too how this dignified messenger seems to rejoice in his work, and to think himself ho­noured by it! He descends from heaven to take his station at the tomb, as one bringing the news of a triumph, and arrayed in its emblems. “His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment,” like a conqueror’s robe, “was white as snow.”

Now this glorious spirit was employed on this occasion by Jesus, not only to do honour to him­self, but to teach us a lesson. He would teach us by it, that *the breach between us and the angels is healed.*

The angels were originally the friends of the inhabitants of the earth. They had a different place of residence, but they were the children of the same common parent and members of the same family, and there was between them and us a sweet communion and friendship. But when man by his disobedience forfeited the favour of God, he forfeited with it the love of the angels. Sin disunited heaven and earth, destroyed the harmony between them, and put an end to their intercourse. This separation however was not an eternal one. We are no sooner reconciled to God by the blood of his Son, than we become recon­ciled to the angels also. As holy and faithful beings, they were constrained to take part with Jehovah in his controversy with man, and they now rejoice to welcome back again to his family the pardoned rebel. Hence says the apostle, when speaking of the Redeemer, “It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth or things in heaven.” The angels therefore again regard us as friends, and love us as brethren. Nay, more; they are made our ministering servants, and do not disdain the office. We are told that they are “sent forth to minister unto them who shall be heirs of salvation.”

And is it not a cheering reflection, brethren, that in all our trials, sorrows, and difficulties, not only is Jesus with us, but his angels also are round about us, and ready to guard and help us; the same angels that fed Elijah in the wilderness, that released Peter from prison, that cheered Paul in the storm, and comforted and strengthened the Saviour in the hour of his agony?

But this thought is serious as well as cheering. Am I always surrounded by the holy angels of God? Are they the constant witnesses of my conduct? Do they see all the actions of my sin­ful life, and hear all the words of my unclean lips? O how often then have I grieved them! Into what scenes and into what society have I taken them! O let me for the future reverence my heavenly attendants! Let me watch my actions, and words, and thoughts, that I may grieve them no more. Never let me dare to lead them again into scenes of vanity and sin.

We may learn also from the appearance of an angel on this occasion, that *the contrite sinner is peculiarly an object of love to the heavenly hosts.* We are told that “there is joy in heaven over a sinner that repenteth,” and here is a confirmation of the saying. The angel of the Lord has compassion on the weeping Peter, and rejoices to take to him a cup of consolation.

What a lesson for ministers, what a lesson for every Christian, is here! It is a heavenly work to comfort the sorrowful. The angels delight in it; they are willing to leave heaven to be employed in it. Shall we then despise it? Shall we turn away from the brother who is mourning for sin, and leave no word of comfort behind us? No. Let us bear one another’s spiritual burdens, and “so fulfil the law of Christ.” Let us take up the words of the angel, and say to all who are broken in heart and enquiring for a Saviour, “Fear not ye; for I know that ye seek Jesus which was crucified.”

2. But the angel of the Lord was not the only messenger employed to convey the news of Christ’s resurrection to Peter. *Three poor women* receive the message from the lips of this heavenly herald, and carry it to the mourning penitent.

It might have been supposed that Christ would have made known his resurrection first to Pilate and Herod who had crucified him, and to the Jews who had rejected him. He would thus have convinced them of their guilt, and wiped off the scandal of his cross. But if the punishment of his enemies and the vindication of his own character appear for a season to be forgotten, we shall surely find the risen Jesus anxious to put honour upon his disciples, and showing himself first to them. But no; the first tidings they hear of his triumph come from Mary Magdalene, and from two other women, her companions in poverty and lowliness. O what a reproof must this have been, not to Peter only, but to all the apostles! And how richly had they merited it! Peter had denied him, and they had all forsaken him and fled. But these faithful women had never de­serted him. Throughout his life, they were ever near him ministering to his wants; and in his death, nothing could divide them from him. With a fortitude which fills us with admiration and al­most with wonder, they stood near his cross, wit­nessed his agonies, and heard his dying groan. After his death, none of the cowardly apostles came near the mangled body of their Master, but these women assisted at his burial, and followed him to the grave. And when his funeral was over, they sat down over against his sepulchre to weep, and could be prevailed on to leave it only by the duties of the sabbath. Neither was their labour of love yet ended. “In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn towards the first day of the week,” the very first moment their duty to God allowed them to testify their affec­tion for their Friend, we see them going again to his sepulchre with “sweet spices, that they might anoint him.”

Here then we may perceive the reason why these three women were thus distinguished. They had been first in love, and affection, and service; it was but right therefore, that they should be first in honour and reward. “Them that honour me,” saith the Lord, “I will honour; and they that despise me, shall be lightly esteemed.”

There is something remarkable too in the hasty manner in which these women were sent with the tidings of Christ’s resurrection to Peter. We are told by Saint Matthew, that the angel invited them to attend the sepulchre of their risen Lord, and to see the place where he lay; but scarcely had they taken a glance at the empty tomb, when they were hastily sent away from it. “Go your way,” said the angel, “go quickly and tell his disciples and Peter, that he is risen from the dead.” They accordingly “departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy, and did run to bring his disciples word.” Why then were these women thus hastily dismissed? There was nothing sinful in the feelings which a view of the tomb of their Saviour was likely to excite; but they were not suffered to stay there to indulge them, that we might be taught that pious feelings must lead to pious actions; that religious medita­tion must often give way to the active duties of life. It is good and sweet to think of Christ, but it is better to act for Christ. “He is the best servant,” says an old writer, “not that delights to stand in his master’s presence, but that carefully minds and diligently goes about his master’s business.”

One active Christian, brethren, is worth a thou­sand merely contemplative admirers of the gospel. It is the working servant, that receives wages; it is the fighting soldier, that has for his reward a triumph and a crown. Religious actions must indeed have their origin in religious affections. The religion of the gospel cannot live in the heart, which has not first learned to think and to feel. But then what are those feelings worth, which have no influence on the disposition and the con­duct? They may resemble the workings of the pious heart, but there is no real piety in them, none of “the power of godliness.” It is one thing to have a studious mind or a lively imagination, and another thing to have Christ in the soul, “the hope of glory.” It is very possible too, even when the great realities of religion have been lodged in the mind, to raise one duty to an undue pre-emi­nence over others, to give to the exercises of de­votion a portion of that time, which ought to be devoted to works of charity and labours of love. We can never be too earnest then in watching our treacherous hearts, and bringing all their workings to this simple standard of the gospel, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” We can never be too earnest in our endeavours to resem­ble him who “went about doing good;” in aiming to bring forth much fruit to the glory of God.

Go your way then, you who, like these women, profess to seek a crucified, and to rejoice in a risen Jesus; go your way, you who, like Peter, know what it is to mourn for sin, and to receive pardon and comfort from a merciful Saviour; go your way, and bind up the broken heart, and speak peace to the troubled soul; go and comfort others with the comforts, wherewith you yourselves have been comforted of God;go and publish to a world of sinners, by all the means which a bountiful Providence has placed within your power, those joyful tidings which have been sent to you in your Bibles; go and send this good news round a pe­rishing world, that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners that whosoever cometh to him shall “in no wise” be cast out; that all who are weary and heavy laden with the burden of their griefs and sins, may come to him and find rest to their troubled souls.