

SERMONS

BY THE

REV. JOHN VENN, M. A.

RECTOR OF CLAPHAM.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

THE THIRD EDITION.

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PREFACE

IT has frequently been remarked concerning literary men, that their lives afford few incidents which are likely to engage the attention of the public. This observation seems especially applicable to persons who have adorned the clerical profession. The duties which devolve upon them have little of variety, and less of ostentation: the pursuits to which they are called are not of this world; and some, that will shine hereafter among the brightest stars of the firmament, have excited little interest beyond their appropriate and limited sphere; so silent was their progress, and so retiring and unobtrusive their character.

Among those who have been most anxious to escape observation, beyond the bounds of their immediate circle, was the Author of the following Sermons. It was his earnest and particular wish that nothing should be recorded of him in the way of panegyric; and his injunctions have not been disregarded. Far be it from the Editors of this work to offend against a desire so humble and devout, and so characteristic of the individual who expressed it; but they consider it as an act of justice, both to the dead and the living, not to send these volumes into the world without some account, however brief, of the departed friend who composed them:—and of such a man, how is it possible to speak in language which shall not serve to record their sense of his extraordinary worth?

The Rev. JOHN VENN was born at Clapham, on the 9th of March, 1759. He was descended from a long line of clerical ancestors; some of whom were remarkable for independence of character, and some for patience in suffering. So far as any knowledge of them is preserved, they appear to have lived in the fear of God, and to have been elevated far above the fear of man. Their profession was sacred; their lines reflected credit upon their profession; and their respected descendant has added new lustre to their fair and honourable name.

His father was the Rev. Henry Venn, well known as a most zealous and indefatigable minister of the Church of England, and as the author of that very useful and popular work *The Complete Duty of Man*. At the time of his son's birth he was curate of Clapham: he removed afterwards to Huddersfield in Yorkshire, where his labours were abundantly blessed; and he died vicar of Yelling, in Huntingdonshire, on the 24th of June, 1797.

The subject of this memoir received the early part of his education under Mr. Shute, at Leeds. He was then removed to Hipperholme School, where he was well grounded in classics by the care of Mr. Sutcliffe. He had after-

wards the benefit of the Rev. Joseph Milner's instruction, at the Grammar School at Hull; and of the Rev. Thomas Robinson's and the Rev. William Ludlam's, the last an eminent mathematician, at Leicester. He was admitted a member of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where he took the degree of A.B. in 1781. In September, 1782, he was ordained deacon, as curate to his father. He entered into priest's orders in March 1783, and two days afterwards was instituted to the living of Little Dunham, in Norfolk. On the 22d of October, 1789, he married Miss Catherine King, of Hull, who died April 15, 1803, leaving a family of seven children. In June, 1792, on the death of Sir J. Stonehouse, the former rector, he was instituted to the living of Clapham. In August, 1812, he married Miss Turton, daughter of John Turton, Esq. of Clapham. At this place he resided, with little intermission, from the beginning of the year 1793, to the day of his death.

It would be a pleasing task to enter, at large, into the history of Mr. Venn's labours, and to develop the full character of his elevated, discriminating, and pious mind: but, for the reason already assigned, the Editors will do little more than cite the testimony of two clergymen; of whom the one was the companion of his early life, and the other was intimately connected with him at a time when his mental powers were in their full action and energy, and when, to the zeal and piety which characterized his youth, was superadded the wisdom of maturer years.—“Mr. Venn,” says the first of these gentlemen, “I consider to have been the oldest friend I had among my equals. Long before either of us went to college we were intimate, being children of parents betwixt whom there existed the most cordial and Christian friendship. After a separation of some years, he came into residence, at college, a few months before I took my degree. But as I continued to reside in Cambridge, our intimacy was renewed and increased; and he then discovered that warmth of affection, and that soundness of judgment and principle, which gained him the esteem and love of all who knew him. Through his influence were first formed those little societies of religious young men, which proved, I believe, a help and comfort to many. At various times, after Mr. Venn's institution to the living of Little Dunham, I visited him, and witnessed his able, affectionate, and zealous manner of addressing his people. In 1792, he established the Dunham Meeting of Clergy, which has continued to this time: it has proved a blessing to that district, and has led, I believe, to the establishment of another, on similar principles, in another part of Norfolk.* At the period of his removal from

* It ought not to be forgotten that Mr. Venn was also the projector and principal founder of the Church Missionary Society to Africa and the East;—a society which by its subsequent progress reflects no small credit on the wisdom and piety which led to its formation.

Dunham, his modesty and disinterestedness were eminently conspicuous; and his friendship to me at that time I shall ever have cause to remember with lively gratitude.

“As a father of a family I have always admired Mr. Venn; and I hardly ever visited Clapham without being impressed with a conviction that the blessing of Heaven was upon him and his. Nowhere did religion appear in a more engaging form; and the impression which both his life and death must have made upon his children and all his friends, could not fail to convince them that ‘the ways of wisdom are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.’”

Our second extract is from a sermon by the Rev. Hugh Pearson, M.A. of St. John’s College, Oxford, preached in the Parish Church of Clapham, on the occasion of Mr. Venn’s death.

“We are met,” says Mr. Pearson, “this day to deplore the loss of one of the best and greatest men, of one of the most eminent and useful ministers, whom we have ever known. The all-wise and gracious, though, as in many other instances, mysterious providence of God has been pleased to remove him from us; and painful and difficult as it may in some respects prove, it is our duty, and I trust it will be our endeavour, humbly to submit to the dispensation, and diligently to profit by the various lessons of instruction which it so loudly speaks to us. Known as your late excellent Pastor must be to most of you by the intercourse and experience of more than twenty years, you will still doubtless expect from me, on this mournful occasion, some notice of his character, some mention of his virtues. Yet if, in the performance of this grateful service, I should appear, in any measure, to violate that unaffected modesty, that deep humility, which distinguished and adorned his character, and which expressly and earnestly sought to prevent any adequate tribute to his merits, let it not be ascribed to any forgetfulness of this excellence, or to any opposition to his known wishes; but to the influence of emotions which cannot and ought not to be repressed, of claims which cannot be resisted, of obligations alike owing to the great and glorious Being who made him what he was, and to the grateful and affectionate people who esteemed and valued him as he deserved. In truth,

“It were profane
To quench a glory lighted at the skies,
And cast in shadows his illustrious close.

“In delineating the character of our revered friend, it is far from my intention to attempt anything elaborate or complete; the pressure, no less of time than of feeling, forbids the one; my own real inability, and my regard to what would have been the wishes of him whom we lament, would prevent the other. My only aim will be, to offer such a brief sketch of a few of

the most prominent and valuable features of his character, as may tend to excite our admiration of the graces which were vouchsafed to him, and our sense of responsibility for the long-continued exercise of them for our own benefit.

“The Christian Minister, whose premature removal (if the expression may be allowed as to any dispensation of Divine Providence) we are this day met to deplore; was adorned by nature with a sound and powerful understanding, with a rich and fertile imagination, with a correct and discriminating judgment, with a temper uncommonly mild and gentle, with affections peculiarly benevolent and tender. Cultivated, enriched, and exalted as these natural endowments were by the stores of learning, observation, and science, and by ‘the wisdom’ and the grace which are ‘from above,’ they united in forming him to all that is most excellent and desirable in the Minister and the Man.

“As a MINISTER, need I in this place enumerate the principal qualities by which he was distinguished? If it be necessary to specify some of them, I would first mention that of which alone he would allow himself to be possessed; *his fidelity in the interpretation and exposition of Scripture*; his integrity in preaching that Word of God which had been committed to his trust, that Gospel of Christ of which he was a Minister. In the execution of this most important part of his ministerial duty he regarded no peculiar system, farther than as the great doctrines of Christianity are clearly and simply drawn from Scripture, and are embodied in the Articles and Liturgy of that Church to which he was so sincerely and zealously attached, and of which he was so distinguished an ornament. He was studious and careful, therefore, to set before you a complete and comprehensive view of the revealed will of God, giving a proportionate measure of attention to the truths and doctrines, the precepts and examples, the promises and threatenings of Scripture; being anxious that none of those committed to his care should err from want of direction, should fail for want of encouragement, should slumber from the neglect of warning and exhortation, should ‘perish for lack of knowledge.’ His doctrine distilled like the dew, and nourished and refreshed those on whom it descended. He fed his flock ‘with knowledge and understanding,’ and led them to the great and ‘good Shepherd,’ who laid down his life for the sheep, whom he uniformly represented as ‘the way, the truth, and the life;’ without whose atonement, righteousness, and intercession, we cannot be forgiven and accepted in the sight of God; without obedience to whose precepts as to the various duties which we owe both to God and man, the imbibing of whose spirit, the imitation of whose example, we cannot be his true disciples; without whose all-powerful grace we can become and can do nothing. In short, ‘by manifestation of the truth he commended himself,’ as a faithful minister of

Christ, 'to every man's conscience in the sight of God; warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom, that he might present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.'

"In the discharge of this part of his ministerial office, shall I speak of the remarkable *originality* of your departed Pastor; of the rich and copious, and varied streams of piety, truth, and eloquence, which flowed from his lips; of that noble and sublime train of thought, which frequently elevated his hearers above the business, the cares, and the pleasures of this lower world; of that spirituality and heavenly-mindedness, which made him occasionally speak of heaven almost as if he had been there, and raised you for the moment, and I would hope, with respect to many, more permanently, to that eminence on which he was habitually seated! In these, and in many other qualities, he will readily be admitted, by all who knew him, to have been unequalled and unrivalled.

Nor were these his only, if they were even his chief, claims to your admiration and regard. The Lent Lectures, which during so many years were exclusively devoted to the moral and religious improvement of the younger part of his flock, and which have been so remarkably blessed to their spiritual benefit; the Society for improving the temporal condition of the Poor in this Parish, and for providing in some measure for his own unavoidable but lamented deficiency in personally administering to their spiritual wants; the enlargement of the Parochial School; the share which he took in the establishment of a local Bible Society; the plan for the better accommodation of the increasing population of the parish, as to the public worship of Almighty God,—all proclaim his pastoral care and kindness, his practical wisdom, his unwearied and beneficial exertions for the temporal and eternal welfare of his flock.

"If from this brief and imperfect sketch of his ministerial character, we direct our attention to our departed friend, as a MAN, we shall be equally struck with the extraordinary value of the blessing which we have recently lost.—*Humility*, profound and unvarying humility, the foundation of all that is great and excellent and amiable in man, was remarkably conspicuous in him whom we are lamenting. Not only was he humble as a sinner before God, ever acknowledging his own unworthiness, and accepting the 'faithful saying' of the Gospel, as the chief of sinners; but humble in his intercourse with men; and with those amongst whom it is most difficult both to be and to appear so, with his associates and equals; not affectedly, however, obtrusively, or painfully humble; but manifesting upon all occasions the most marked yet unostentatious apprehension of his own inferiority; eagerly and cordially allowing and assigning to others a large share of the merit, or the praise, which everyone else perceived to be far more

justly due to himself; frequently lamenting his imperfections and deficiencies in duty; thinking nothing of his eminent and various services; and willingly performing the least and lowest offices of kindness and love.

“*Universal benevolence*, and uncommon *tenderness*, were other striking features in the character we are considering.—His love of man was indeed inferior only to his love of God. It was the element in which he moved in his intercourse with others; and the kindness which warmed his heart, beamed forth in his countenance, and was manifest in all his words and actions. This truly Christian temper was steady and invariable, and prompted him to a thousand nameless expressions of it, which diffused an air of peace and harmony, of benevolence and happiness, over all around him.

“*Disinterestedness*, a greatness and magnanimity which overlooked all that was envious, little, or selfish, was another admirable quality which distinguished your late excellent Minister, and which could not escape the notice of the most superficial observer of his conduct.

“I might mention the remarkable *soundness of his judgment*, which rendered him so wise and able a counsellor; the singular *sobriety* of his views, possessed as he was of such genius and talent; and the equanimity and well-balanced proportion of his whole character. But enough has been already said, and much more will readily occur to those who have been so long and so intimately acquainted with his excellence, to prove the value of what was once enjoyed, and the greatness of our present loss.

That such a Minister and such a Man should have been thus removed in the midst of his years, and in the midst of his usefulness, is one of those mysteries in Providence, which we too often witness, but endeavour in vain fully to comprehend. ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ We may, indeed, consider, that your late Pastor had been long spared to you; that he had taught, and exemplified, and effected much for your benefit; and that he was peculiarly qualified to be an inhabitant of that higher world to which he had long aspired, and for the enjoyment of which he was anxiously training you. Still there will remain in this mournful dispensation of Providence, much that is painful, trying, and, for the present, inexplicable. In one respect, however, it is calculated to afford us the most important instruction and consolation. During the lengthened and afflicting illness which terminated in the death of our lamented friend, he exhibited an example of the infinite excellence and value of the Gospel, of the solid peace, the firm hope, the joy unspeakable, which it inspires; of the meekness, the patience; the submission, the resignation, the spiritual and heavenly temper of the true Christian; an example which infinitely ex-

ceeds the most laboured and finished description of those blessings, and was doubtless intended, as it is eminently suited, to produce the deepest and most beneficial impressions upon our minds.

“The hour of sickness and the bed of death are the times which more especially try the stability of the foundation on which the Christian hope is built: it is then that the real character appears, that the genuine dispositions of the soul are manifest, and that the supports and consolations of Divine Grace are most abundantly vouchsafed to the faithful servants of Christ. It was thus with the pious and excellent subject of these remarks. Living as he had done the life of the righteous, it could scarcely be doubted, that he would in sickness possess his peace and comfort, and in death enjoy his blessedness and hope. Accordingly, your departed Minister afforded a most animating and edifying example of the reality and power of religion, of the faithfulness of God to his promises, of the triumph of the Gospel of Christ over all the miseries of nature, over sickness and pain, and anxiety and fear, over sin and sorrow, and over the last enemy, even death itself. Our dear and valued friend was exercised, during his illness, with long-continued and excruciating pain: yet, amidst his severest sufferings, no impatient or complaining word was heard to proceed out of his lips. His language was uniformly expressive of patience and resignation to the holy will of God; and once, in the very words of a most devout and distinguished Christian (the learned, pious, and judicious Hooker), whom in many respects he nearly resembled; ‘Since I owe thee a death, Lord, let it not be terrible, and then take thy own time; I submit to it! Let not mine, O Lord, but let thy will be done.’

“That filial confidence in God, which had ever formed a distinguishing part of his character, was strikingly displayed in his last illness. Few men, perhaps, had stronger ties to bind them to this world, or more powerful and affecting motives to the love of longer life, than your departed Minister: yet all was subdued to the will of God; all was resigned to his infinitely wise and holy appointments. He doubted not the wisdom, the mercy, and the goodness of the dispensation which was about to separate him from the duties of his ministerial service, and the objects of his tenderest earthly affections; and under the influence of Divine Grace he soared above the present world, and anticipated the society, the employments, and the pleasures of the blessed inhabitants of heaven. Yet as long as he remained in this state of trial, he was occupied in prayers for his flock, that the great Head of the Church would bestow upon them a faithful, able, and laborious pastor; for his family, that they might be guided and supported, comforted and blessed; for himself; that patience might have its perfect work; that he might be sanctified in body, soul, and spirit; that he might be guided by the Divine counsel whilst here, and at length be received to glory. Thankful for the

abundant blessings he had enjoyed; full of consideration, tenderness, and love to all around him, he looked forward to the hour of dissolution, not only without dismay, but with hope and joy. He declared that the light affliction he was then enduring was working out for him a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; that the sting of death was taken away; that although he walked through its dark valley, he feared no evil; that the rod and staff of his heavenly Shepherd supported and comforted him; that he knew whom he had believed, and was persuaded that he was able to keep that which he had committed unto him against that day; that, though heart and flesh were failing, God was the strength of his heart, and his portion for ever. The language of praise was indeed almost constantly heard from his mouth. Though so frequently tortured with pain, and exhausted with weakness, these were the strains in which he often expressed his gratitude and love to his God and Saviour;

‘T’ll praise Him while he lends me breath;
And when my voice is lost in death
Praise shall employ my nobler powers:
My days of praise shall ne’er be past,
While life and thought and being last,
Or immortality endures.

“I should detain you too long, if I were to detail but a small part of the truly divine and Christian words which proceeded out of his lips, during the progress of his long and fatal illness. What I have just stated will, I am persuaded, be sufficient to convince you, how eminent and undoubted an example your deceased Pastor afforded of the power and excellency of that Gospel which he had so faithfully preached; and how earnestly it is to be desired by every one of us, that we may resemble him in our lives, that so our last end may be like his!

“And here I should at once proceed to exhort you to be *followers* of him as he was of Christ, if I had not a far more interesting and impressive Address to present to you than any which I could imagine. I hold in my hand part of a Pastoral Letter intended to be addressed to you by your late invaluable Minister; dictated not long before his lamented death, but interrupted by the unexpected and rapid progress of disease and weakness. Yet though it is, alas! but a fragment, you will, I am sure, receive it with all that reverence and affection which it so justly demands. It is thus entitled:—

“*A Pastoral Farewell Address from the Rev. John Venn, Rector of Clapham, to his respected and beloved Flock.*

“My dear Friends,

“I cannot quit the pastoral relation which I have so long held over you, without expressing my deep sense of obligation to you, and without giving

you my last friendly advice. For twenty years I have lived amongst you, and preached to you. With respect to myself, I have humbly to request you to pardon the many deficiencies in my ministry and conduct of which I am now deeply sensible. But with respect to one thing, I can truly say that I have acquitted my duty faithfully and conscientiously. I have taken much pains to understand accurately, and impartially to preach to you, the Gospel of Christ, as it appeared to me to be delivered by Christ and his Apostles. In this respect I have called no man master; nor have I ever, in any one instance that I know of, for the sake of system, given an interpretation to any part of the word of God which I was not fully convinced, after the most mature deliberation, to be just and right: so that I can truly say, I have not shunned to declare unto you the whole counsel of God.

“And now, with respect to yourselves, I have to return you my most sincere thanks for your kind, and tender, and candid acceptance of my labours amongst you. I have met with daily instances of attention, civility, and affection; and I cannot recollect, that in the whole course of my ministry I have met with a single instance of rudeness or incivility. You have been ready to forward every good work which I have proposed. With a more attentive audience no pastor was ever blessed: the decency and devotion of your conduct in the house of God have been such as to attract the notice and excite the admiration of every stranger. By your kind assistance and liberality, I have been enabled to complete the three things nearest my heart:—by the enlargement of our School, every child in the parish may be gratuitously taught to read; by the institution of the Bible Society, every family will be supplied with a Bible; and by the erection of a Chapel of Ease (the Bill for which has already passed Parliament), accommodation will be provided for every inhabitant to worship God with facility and convenience. These are blessings which rarely fall to the lot of a Minister in so short a period.

“But now, my beloved friends, when I am standing upon the verge of eternity, and looking forward to the time when you and I must meet together before the awful tribunal of God, suffer me, I entreat you, to warn you, that you stop not short in the mere forms of religion. Suffer me to remind you of some of the principal doctrines which I have ever insisted upon amongst you, and which now, at the hour of death, appear to me to be more important and real than ever.

“‘The foundation of all my preaching amongst you has been this; that we are naturally in a corrupt state, alienated from God, and subject therefore to the just displeasure and condemnation of the Almighty; that it is the chief business of man in this life, and his first and most important duty, to seek deliverance from that state, that he may be reconciled to God—’

“Here, I regret to say, this interesting and valuable Farewell Address

from your late beloved Pastor, ends. It bears upon it striking marks of his characteristic humility, faithfulness, and concern for the spiritual and eternal welfare of his flock: and I cannot doubt, that its simple, affectionate, and weighty import will make a deep and lasting impression upon your minds. The long and uniform tenor of his preaching may enable you to conjecture what would probably have been the substance of his advice and exhortation, had he been permitted to have completed this parting address. He would doubtless have repeated, what he had so frequently declared, and on which he had been accustomed so copiously and ably to enlarge;—that the deliverance of fallen, sinful man, was to be sought by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, as the only and all-sufficient Saviour; and by the renewing and sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit, to be obtained by fervent and persevering prayer.”

After several weeks of great suffering, he finished his course on the morning of the first of July, 1813. His remains were followed to the grave by a large concourse of his mourning parishioners, and of his friends both clergy and laymen; by several of whom it was afterwards unanimously determined to raise a monument to his memory, as an evidence to future times of *his* singular worth and of *their* affection.—It is to be lamented that Mr. Venn prepared no Sermons for the press. The following Discourses were selected from his manuscripts; and may therefore be received as a fair exhibition of his manner, and sentiments, and doctrine. But the Editors themselves are in a measure responsible for any defects which may be discovered in the style. Mr. Venn addressed one of them in the following terms, a few months before he died:—“I request you to point out from recollection, as well as you can, those Sermons of mine which you may think to be the least unworthy of the public eye. I must further trust to your kindness in taking a share in giving them that correction which is absolutely necessary for their publication, leaving as much as you can unaltered, &c.” They have been anxious to present this work to the public eye in the state in which they conceive that Mr. Venn himself would have wished it to appear; and they dismiss it from their hands with an earnest prayer that it may be effectual, by the blessing of God, to the conversion and salvation of many souls.

The following inscription appears on the Monument:

TO THE MEMORY OF THE REVEREND JOHN VENN, M.A. FOR TWENTY YEARS RECTOR OF THIS PARISH
HE WAS SON OF THE REVEREND HENRY VENN, VICAR OF YELLING;
AND HIS PROGENITORS, FOR SEVERAL GENERATIONS, WERE MINISTERS OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.
HE WAS ENDOWED BY PROVIDENCE WITH A SOUND AND POWERFUL UNDERSTANDING:

AND HE ADDED TO AN AMPLE FUND OF CLASSICAL KNOWLEDGE
A FAMILIAR ACQUAINTANCE WITH ALL THE MORE USEFUL PARTS OF PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE:
HIS TASTE WAS SIMPLE. HIS DISPOSITION WAS HUMBLE AND BENEVOLENT.
HIS MANNERS WERE MILD AND CONCILIATING.
AS A **DIVINE**, HE WAS COMPREHENSIVE AND ELEVATED IN HIS VIEWS,
AND PECULIARLY CONVERSANT WITH THEOLOGICAL SUBJECTS;
BUT HE DERIVED HIS CHIEF KNOWLEDGE FROM THE SCRIPTURES THEMSELVES,
WHICH HE DILIGENTLY STUDIED AND FAITHFULLY INTERPRETED.
AS A **PREACHER**, HE WAS AFFECTIONATE AND PERSUASIVE,
INTELLECTUAL AND DISCRIMINATING, SERIOUS, SOLEMN, AND DEVOUT;
ANXIOUS TO IMPRESS ON OTHERS THOSE EVANGELICAL TRUTHS WHICH HE HIMSELF SO DEEPLY FELT.
BY HIS **FAMILY**, AMONG WHOM HE WAS SINGULARLY BELOVED,
HIS REMEMBRANCE WILL BE CHERISHED WITH PECULIAR TENDERNESS.
HAVING BEEN SUSTAINED DURING A LONG AND TRYING ILLNESS,
BY A STEDFAST FAITH IN THAT SAVIOUR WHOM IN ALL HIS PREACHING HE LABOURED TO EXALT,
HE DIED 1 JULY, 1813, AGED 54 YEARS, LEAVING TO HIS SURVIVING FAMILY AND FLOCK AN ENCOURAGING EXAMPLE
OF THE BLESSEDNESS OF THOSE WHO EMBRACE WITH THEIR WHOLE HEARTS THE RELIGION OF JESUS CHRIST.

REMEMBER THEM WHICH HAVE THE RULE OVER YOU, WHO HAVE SPOKEN UNTO YOU THE WORD OF GOD; WHOSE FAITH FOLLOW,
CONSIDERING THE END OF THEIR CONVERSATION; JESUS CHRIST, THE SAME YESTERDAY, AND TO DAY, AND FOR EVER.—HEB. XIII. 7, 8.

THIS MONUMENT WAS ERECTED, AS A TESTIMONY OF RESPECT AND AFFECTION, BY FRIENDS OF THE DECEASED,