

SERMONS

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SERMON XI.

ON THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS.

1 JOHN i. 3, 4.

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.

THE Communion of Saints is an article of our faith, which we are taught to profess in that short summary of it which we so often repeat, and which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed. It was probably thought more worthy of mention than other subjects, which, though not specified, are equally material, on account of its importance in a practical point of view. It appears to be inserted in order to remind us, that Christians should be found united to each other in the closest bonds of love.

The words of the text speak of this communion, or fellowship of souls. And they also enlarge our ideas of that communion, by teaching us to consider it, not as confined to the righteous upon earth, but as reaching to the Father of spirits, and to his Son Jesus Christ. Indeed, the very foundation of the communion of saints is the communion which is first established with the Head of the Church, the Author and Finisher of their faith. "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full." The Apostle here speaks of that which is the substance of the preaching of the Gospel; namely, the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. He had seen Him who was manifested to the world; he had heard him converse; he had touched him with his hands; and this Lord of life, thus made man, he had declared unto the disciples. The end of this preaching of Christ was to unite believers together in him; to make them partakers of one common joy in the Lord, and to cause them also to have fellowship with the Father and with the Son. Before there could be any real communion with each other, it was necessary that they should be united by one strong and common bond. This bond was faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. By faith in him they were cleansed from their old sins; they were adopted into God's family, and became the sons of God. By faith they were made partakers of the influence of the Holy Ghost, and sealed with the Spirit, which is the earnest of the possession purchased by Christ. By faith they led a holy life, "perfecting holiness in the fear of God." By faith they

all looked up to the same glorious hope of their calling; even the joyful “inheritance of the saints in light,” in which they had a sure expectation of being blessed, when this transitory and evil life should be terminated. Thus their communion arose out of a similarity of condition, pursuits, and enjoyments. The subjects of one state, the followers of one political party, the individuals of one family, the members of one society of friends, have fellowship with each other. There is something similar in their views, manners, interests, and pursuits; and hence they have much intercourse. Even so, the members of the Church of Christ are united by sympathies of the most endearing kind.

But when we speak of the saints as all members of the same family, it is necessary that we consider that family in its whole extent. It is not confined to the small circle of holy persons worshipping together upon earth. These comprise but a very small part. The whole, who are thus united in Christ, form an assembly whose worth no tongue can describe, and whose number no man can compute. They are a vast body, composed not only of private Christians and of ministers now dwelling together upon earth, but of all those faithful disciples of Christ who have ever lived upon it. Confessors and martyrs, prophets and apostles, priests and patriarchs, saints militant below and spirits triumphant and made perfect above—all these make but one family. They are distinct branches of it; severed, for a little while, by time and space, but not separated by nature.

The family is to be considered as still more ample than this. The angels of heaven, who are subject to Christ, and employed by him as ministering spirits to the heirs of salvation, may be justly considered as comprising a part of it; for they worship the same Lord, they are engaged in the same pursuits; and therefore the Apostle speaks of them as branches of the same family living under the same Head.

Such is the family of God; into which Christ has introduced us, giving to all who are in him, access by “one spirit unto the Father.” Over this family the Father, the Son, and the Spirit preside; each of them in their several offices holding communion with the members, and the members with them.

1. They have *communion or fellowship with God the Father*.—Truly, says the Apostle, “our fellowship is with the Father.” All communion is reciprocal: God is the Father; the saints are the sons. He is the original Author and Source of all their grace and happiness. He bestowed upon them the inestimable gift of a Saviour. He communicates to them grace: they, receiving that grace, return to him the tribute of praise and thanksgiving. He bestows life and spiritual faculties: they use that life and employ those faculties in glorifying his name and exalting his perfections. He imparts to them of his love; he sheds it abroad in their hearts: they love him in return, and offer to him the free-will offering of a grateful heart. They hold communion with him, by their fervent prayers before the Throne of

Grace: and He vouchsafes the grace they request, and the mercy they need. This is their communion with the Father.

2. They *have communion with the Son*. “Our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.”—This union between Christ and his members is of a very intimate nature, and is the foundation of their union with each other. They are one with each other, because they are one with him. He took upon him their nature, became bone of their bone, and flesh of their flesh; “being made in all respects like unto them, sin only excepted.” He bore their sins, and the curse due to them; and he communicates to them of his Divine blessings and glory: and thus they become “the righteousness of God in him.” He holds communion with his Church, and his Church with him, by daily and stated ordinances; by means of which he conveys to them his grace. The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is emphatically the Communion of his Body and Blood. By ministers also, and by the preaching of the word, there is communion between the Head of the Church and his members. As he is, so are we. Because “he lives, we live also.” We share in his sufferings, in his grace, and in his glory. He is the vine, and we are the branches.

3. *But there is a communion also with the Holy Spirit*.—It is chiefly through the medium of the Holy Spirit that the Communion of the Church with the Father and the Son is maintained. It is the office of the Spirit to dwell with the saints, to abide with them, and to seal them to the day of redemption. This doctrine is frequently declared in Scripture. “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.” “If ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, whereby we cry, Abba, Father!” The Spirit dwelleth with the saints as in a temple: “Know ye not,” says the Apostle, “that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” This union of the soul with the Spirit of God is manifested and cherished, on his part, by communicating to it holy desires; by shedding upon it his sanctifying influences; and by the consequent production of heavenly light and knowledge, and hope, and peace, and all spiritual consolations. On our part, it is sustained by meditation and prayer, by diligence in the use of all the appointed ordinances, by cherishing the blessed influences imparted to us, and by studying to walk in all the commandments of our Lord blameless; for he has declared, “If any man love me, and keep my commandments, my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our abode with him.” Thus the whole body of the faithful join together in communion with the Father of spirits: all meet at the same Throne of Grace; the saints below, and the spirits made perfect above. They unite in one common feeling, and join in one song of praise, “to Him that sitteth on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

4. But further, there is a communion *between the saints in this world and the holy angels*. —This does not, indeed, consist in a visible intercourse; but it is not

less real on that account. The Apostle, while describing the several branches of the family of God, expressly says, “We are come to an innumerable company of angels.” Their intercourse with us is abundantly testified by holy writ. An angel foretold the death of John. An angel communicated to the blessed Virgin the glad tidings of a Saviour to be born. A whole choir of angels appeared to the shepherds, and sung glory to God, on account of the Redeemer’s birth. Angels announced his resurrection, and showed the place where his body had been laid. Angels carried the soul of the holy but despised Lazarus to Abraham’s bosom. An angel opened the door to Peter the Apostle, and thus delivered him out of prison. Angels were made ministers of prophecy to Daniel, and to the beloved John; and they were employed to bear the golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of the saints. And it will be angels who shall sever the wicked from the faithful at the resurrection of the just. In short, the angels are “ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation.” They are engaged in promoting the cause of Christ in his Church, and are interested in the welfare of his members: “There is joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner that repenteth.”

5. There is also a communion *between the different saints who live on earth, as well as between them and those who have departed this life in the faith and fear of God.*—These last are still members of the same family, removed into a different part of the house of God. Death makes no change of employments or affections. It only elevates and refines them.

With respect to the saints militant here on earth, it is to be observed, that some kind of communion subsists between all the members of the external church. They are partakers of the same baptism; they make the same profession of faith; they acknowledge the same principles of religion; they hear the same word preached; they sit at the same table, and partake of the same sacred elements of bread and wine. But these things are all external: they are but signs or symbols of little importance, while the spirit and grace they signify are wanting. It is only among real Christians that there can be true communion. And this consists in several particulars, some of which I will now proceed to specify.

The Church of Christ is dispersed through the whole globe, separated by difference of language, by disparity of rank, of age, and of circumstances. But, as if actuated by one soul, they all engage in the same *pursuits*: all make it their chief study to serve and glorify God; all daily bow their knees before God the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ; all are occupied in reading and meditating on his blessed Word; all are seeking to have their evil natures sanctified, and to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ” their common Lord. These are their daily pursuits; these the works which they feel and avow to be of the first importance. Thus they continue to be occupied, till the day when their Lord calls them to join

the family of the redeemed above.

Nor is this communion confined to their occupations. They share also in each other's *joys*; "joys in which a stranger intermeddleth not."— They mutually rejoice in Christ, in the honour paid to his name, and in the increasing knowledge of his religion. They rejoice when the light of God's countenance is lifted up upon their souls, and their joy they love to communicate. They rejoice in the happiness and salvation of each other, no envy dividing the brethren in Christ. Their *consolations* are the same. The blessed Spirit reveals to all the same *truths*, and communicates the same *grace* to their souls.

There is, also, a communion of *sorrows* among the saints. "If one member" of the mystical body of Christ "suffers," the rest "suffer with it."—They who are personally strangers, yet feel a brother's interest in all who love God. They enter into their trials, for they are their own: they feel for them, while they behold them struggling with an evil nature and a sinful world. Do they see them affected with bodily pain? They have more than a stranger's compassion for them. Do they hear of their lying upon a dying bed? With the anxious solicitude of brethren, they send up fervent prayer on their behalf, and tenderly sympathize with them, while engaged in the last struggle with the powers of darkness and the body of sin.

Strong also and exquisite is the communion of *love* between the brethren in Christ.—To what acts of compassion does not the love of Christ incite Christians? To what labours of love does it not stimulate them? What candour, what good-will, what readiness to oblige all who love their common Lord, does not the sense of his dying love produce? But, alas! how frequently do the chilling frosts of this cold and unfriendly climate check the growth of this Divine charity. The discovery of hypocrisy, the frowning aspect of the world, the lethargic state of some brethren, the declension or apostasy of others, produce disastrous changes, and separate those whom God had united. Still, however, the members of the Church of Christ, in general, enjoy an union which no ties of party, country, or even kindred, could produce; and they look forward with hope to the day when they shall love each other, even as they are now loved by their God.

They enjoy, moreover, communion with each other, by much *actual intercourse and conversation in the world*.—They who have the same pursuits, are engaged in the same design, and are interested in the same cause, cannot be contented to remain strangers to each other. They have a communion of subjects upon which they can converse; subjects important as heaven, dear as eternal life. To each other, therefore, they will often open their hearts, and will take sweet counsel together. They will relate their trials, and describe their fears and hopes, with an interest which none except themselves can feel.

They enjoy, lastly, communion with each other in *prayer*.—Their hearts are

opened before the Throne of Grace; their affections are kindled at the flame of the altar of God. Here, therefore, in sweet fellowship, the many thousands of Israel meet: here they offer up the same petitions; here they plead for each other in fervent supplication; and, while they unite in adoration and intercession, their affections are enlivened; so that, like the disciples at Emmaus, while holding communion with their Lord, they say, “Did not our hearts burn within us?”—or, with Peter on the Mount, “It is good for us to be here.” Thus, on this holy day, are all the servants of Christ in every country, in every climate, of every denomination and sect, however separated by distance or by varying modes of worship, united before the Throne of Grace in offering up the same devout supplications, and the same animated praises.

Such, then, is the fellowship to which the Apostle in my text invited the disciples to whom he wrote. Such, also, is the fellowship to which we are called. Here, let us each say to our souls—“What is thy state, and with whom dost thou hold communion? Is it with men of a worldly spirit? Dost thou rejoice only in their pleasures, grieve only in their sorrows, engage only in their employments? Then, thou art of the world, even as they are of the world. But happy indeed art thou, if thou canst say, ‘My delight is with the saints that are upon the earth, and with such as excel in virtue:’ my communion is with the Father of spirits, and with his Son Jesus Christ my Redeemer, and with the angels above. I am also joined with the whole church of the faithful below: I am occupied in the same work, I possess the same comforts, I am warmed with the same love. I feel a brother’s sympathy with the members of Christ. My soul unites itself to them when I approach the Throne of Grace, and my heart burns within me while I converse with them upon the things of God.”—My “brethren in Christ,” such will be our feelings if we are actuated by the Spirit of God.

Numerous are the inferences suggested by this subject. I shall briefly touch on some of them.— In the first place, it suggests to us the necessity of being separate from the world, and of becoming “a holy and peculiar people, zealous of good works.” The light of Divine Truth, and the holiness flowing from it, alone lead to that fellowship with God, and with each other, which has been described. “If we walk in the light, as God is in the light, we have fellowship with each other.” But “if we say we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth.” For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness, light with darkness? There can be no communion where there is no similitude. Communion arises from a similarity of disposition and pursuits.

Let this subject also be employed to excite our thankful acknowledgments. What are we, that we should be admitted to fellowship with God? Oh, how glorious is the “hope of our calling!” Let this hope support us amidst the trials of the

world, and against the loss of friends, which the devout pursuit of religion may sometimes produce. Is it not enough that we are joined in fellowship with angels and archangels, with the glorious company of the apostles, the noble army of martyrs, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, the holy church universal? Such a communion should fill us with lofty ideas and feelings: the heirs of heaven should not suffer their minds to be grovelling upon earth, or their hearts to be carried away with the love of a polluted world. "Let our light shine before men." Let us live as those who have "fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ."

Let the subject inspire affection also towards real Christians. "Let our love be without dissimulation." Let us show candour to the followers of the same Master. Are we not brethren, and shall we make each other offenders for a word? Shall those for whom Christ died be unwilling to exercise kindness to each other? Shall those, who are fellow-heirs of the same promise, live as if they were strangers here? Oh let us, for Christ's sake, overlook our petty differences! Let the love of Christ be the central point in which we meet. Let it be employed to cement love between Christian brethren. Let us cultivate a sympathizing spirit. Let us abound in all the sympathies of love, in works of charity, in acts of pity and kindness for each other. Thus shall we show that we really have fellowship with Christ; thus shall we approve ourselves to be his disciples.