

SERMONS

BY THE

REV. JOHN VENN, M. A.

RECTOR OF CLAPHAM.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

THE THIRD EDITION.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY ELLERTON AND HENDERSON,
JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET STREET:

AND SOLD BY J. HATCHARD, PICCADILLY; AND
RIVINGTONS, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD.

1818.

SERMON XII.

ON COMMUNION WITH THE ANGELS.

Hebrews xii. 22.

Ye are come to an innumerable company of angels.

IT appears to have been a favourite practice with St. Paul, to display to the disciples the privileges and happiness which belong to the state of a real Christian. He felt that happiness, and he enjoyed those privileges, in so great a degree himself, that he earnestly desired others to be made partakers of them. He accordingly gives, in the passage from which my text is taken, a striking view of the superiority of Christian privileges to those of the Jewish Church. “Ye” Christians, he says, “are not come unto the Mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire; nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest”—things calculated only to fill the mind with terror and dismay; “but ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels; to the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven; and to God the Judge of all; and to the spirits of just men made perfect; and to Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant; and to the blood of sprinkling, which speaketh better things than that of Abel.” Such is the society into which you are introduced,—such are the privileges you are called to enjoy.

Amongst the different members of this glorious assembly, into whose society and communion we are invited, we find mention made of “an *innumerable company of angels.*” This may justly lead us to consider as well their nature, as the relation to them into which we are brought by the Gospel dispensation. It is not, however, as a matter of curiosity, or subject of speculation, that I propose this subject to you; for it is to improvement alone that this day and this place are consecrated. Neither should we give the reins to a fanciful imagination, in considering a subject with which our acquaintance is necessarily so limited. On the contrary, we should, with due modesty and humility, adhere to the word of God, and be content with the information it supplies.

I do not therefore, attempt to investigate or display the nature of angels. Of the manner in which unembodied spirits exist, we can perhaps at present form no conception. Suffice it to say, that the Scriptures represent the good angels as bright and glorious spirits, who have kept their original state of holiness and happiness, and who delight to employ all the powers with

which God has endowed them, in fulfilling his will and promoting his glory. Without entering, therefore, into any further explanation of their nature, let me, in the first instance, direct your attention to their number.

It is here said, “ye are come to an *innumerable* company of angels.”—We find, in the prophet Daniel, a magnificent account given of the angels standing round the throne of God. “I beheld,” says he, describing his vision, “till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of Days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire; —a fiery stream issued and came forth from him;—thousand thousands ministered to him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.” Such is the number of the attendants of the Divine Majesty, that language fails in its power to express it. We need remark only, that their number is worthy of the majesty of him whose glory as much exceeds all created glory as his nature surpasses ours. David labours, in like manner, to give us an idea of the number of angels. “The chariots of God,” he says, “are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels.” And the beloved disciple St John, when favoured with a view of heaven, endeavours in vain to express the number of angelic beings with which its spacious courts were filled. “I beheld,” he says, “and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands.”

These passages of Scripture are sufficient to shew that the company of angels is innumerable. Nor indeed should we be surprised at this, when we consider the nature of heaven, the place of their habitation. Heaven is the perfection of the creation of God. It is the grand scene of existence; the court where God himself is said to hold his residence. This world can be considered only as a minute part of his works, and ourselves as creatures comparatively of a low class. The inhabitants of the world “come up and are cut down like a flower;” but the inhabitants of heaven never die. This world itself is but a transitory scene; a stage erected for a little while; but heaven endureth for ever. Surely then, considering the majesty of heaven, it might be expected that these glorious beings; whose powers and capacities, and whose duration of existence, are so infinitely superior to those of man, should also be as much superior in number to the inhabitants of this mere point in the dominions of God. And here allow me to draw an inference from this statement.—Be encouraged, you who are endeavouring to serve God in this evil world, from the consideration of the number of the angelic beings. It is indeed painful to behold the world around you lying in a state of ignorance and wickedness; to behold so few examples of zeal for God,

and ardent love to his name; of disinterested charity; of unblemished righteousness. Often, perhaps, are you tempted to cry out with Elijah, "I am left alone in the earth." Often, with painful but necessary singularity, are you obliged to dissent from the practice of the world, and to say, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord." But be not disheartened by the melancholy examples which crowd around you. If your eyes were opened, like those of the servant of Elisha, you would see that "there are more with you than against you." No: you who serve God faithfully and delight to do his will, you are not the few among his creatures. You are not singular, whatever the surrounding scene may seem to suggest. Those are singular among the works of God, who neglect and despise their Creator; who are living in rebellion against his will, and have shaken off the yoke of the Divine Government:—those, as you will discover in the day when you shall be permitted to behold God "face to face;" those are the few, those are the anomalous and monstrous parts of the creation. You, who are sincere Christians, shall be numbered with "an innumerable company,"—united to those who are as countless as the sands of the sea; those holy and happy spirits who have ever loved and served (heir God. Let us then look up from this evil world to the "innumerable company of angels." We, if Christians indeed, are "come" to them;—a relation has commenced between them and the "saints which are in Christ Jesus." We, who were "once afar off, are brought nigh to them." We, who were separated from them, are now united to them. We may consider ourselves as having "come to" this "innumerable company" as our *friends*—as *ministering spirits*—as *examples*—and as *eternal associates*. Let us examine these four points in succession.

I. In the first place, then, we have come to them as *Friends*.

Originally, angels and men were as one family. They were the creatures of the same Lord, and partakers of the same nature. There existed between them a community of interests, a similarity of dispositions; and therefore these "bright morning stars sang together, and the sons of God shouted for joy," when the foundations of the earth, the habitation of man, were laid. But, by sin, the bond of union was broken. Then angels became the ministers of God's vengeance against man. It was an angel who "went through the land of Egypt, and smote the first born in every house, that he died." It was an angel who brought the pestilence upon Judea for three days, and who lifted up his sword against Jerusalem to destroy it. It was an angel who went into "the camp of the Assyrians, and slew in one night one hundred and seventy-five thousand men." It was an angel who smote Herod, while seated upon his throne, and impiously permitting the honour to be paid to him which belongeth only to God. —We find angels also

employed to sound the trumpets of God's vengeance, and to pour out the vials of wrath upon a guilty land. Thus angels are employed as the scourges of guilty and impenitent man. But Christians are, by virtue of their union with Christ, re-united to the angels as friends. Thus Christ is described as having incorporated them into "one family." It was the "good pleasure of God, which he purposed in himself, to gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are in earth." Into what a noble family, therefore, are we, if really united to Christ, incorporated! To what a society are we united! To "Jesus, the Mediator," and to "an innumerable company of angels!" O! ye who are "poor in this world," but are "rich in faith, heirs" of the promises, look to the greatness of your inheritance, and to the dignity of your birth-right in Christ. What, though you may be poor and despised, yet if "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ," if the angels are your friends, have you cause to complain? The angels regard no earthly distinctions; they consider only the love you bear to Christ. They measure your value, not by your interest in the fading possessions of this world; not by the pomp you display, or by the raiment you put on; but by your love to God, and by his love to you.

II. But we are not come to the angels as *friends* only: they are also "Ministering Spirits, sent to minister to the heirs of salvation."

To call the angels our friends, is a privilege and dignity which every humble person will justly esteem too great for such a sinful and corrupt being as man. But as their friendship with man springs not from our intrinsic merit, but from the love they bear to the Author of our creation, and from the elevation of a nature at once commanding admiration and destitute of pride; so this love of God, and this elevation of nature, dispose them to every employment by which God may be honoured, and man be blessed: therefore are they ministering servants to the heirs of salvation.— Thus, in order to intimate the perpetual intercourse between heaven and earth, a "ladder was displayed to the Patriarch Jacob, reaching from the one to the other," and the "angels of God, ascending and descending" upon it. Thus, also, when overwhelmed with fear of the power and indignation of Esau, whose approach he expected, was Jacob comforted by God with a vision of heavenly troops commissioned to protect him. "And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him: and when Jacob saw them he said, This is God's host; and he called the name of that place Mahanaim," or the two armies:—Thus we find them often appearing, and still oftener ministering, to the servants of God in the various trials and distresses to which they were exposed. It was an angel who brought to Elisha bread in the wilderness; that he might be strengthened for his journey. An angel

appeared to Gideon, to strengthen him, and to give him assurance of victory. An angel appeared unto Zechariah, when ministering before the altar, to announce to him the birth of the illustrious forerunner of the Messiah. It was an angel who shewed to the Prophets Daniel and Zechariah, and to the Apostle John, the “things which should come upon the earth.” An angel delivered Peter out of prison, and broke the chains with which he was bound. The angels carried the soul of Lazarus, when he died, into Abraham’s bosom. An angel stood by Paul, to comfort him when about to be shipwrecked, and to declare to him that no harm should befall him or the persons with him. The angels are said to take charge of the servant of God, “lest at any time he should dash his foot against a stone.” The angels also are employed as instruments in the hand of God, to defend the true Christian from Satan, and to defeat his evil machinations against the Church.

What encouraging views does this representation open to us! How, in the midst of perils or in the depths of solitudes, may we comfort ourselves with the idea of being surrounded by the heavenly host! What confidence may we place in their protection, if only we fear and serve God! Oh! when shall we duly estimate the blessings which accompany the Divine favour?

III. But I go on to consider the angels in another point of view. We may be said to have come to them as our *models* or *examples*.

“Wherein.” it may be asked “can they be examples to us? When we propose a model to ourselves to imitate, we take one like ourselves, who has the same object to pursue, and the same difficulties to overcome.” Now, it is true, that between the angels and ourselves there is an infinite distance: yet, in many points, such a degree of correspondence prevails, that we may justly propose them as objects of our imitation. They are, for instance, examples to us in the objects of their contemplation, in their adoration of God, in the harmony they display, in the love they feel, and in the obedience they render to the Divine command. Let us briefly regard these blessed spirits in each of these points of view.

1. First, then, consider the *object of their contemplation*.—Doubtless, the knowledge of beings, whose powers are so transcendent, must be various and extensive; extending, perhaps, to subjects of which we can form no conception. But it is remarkable, that they are not held up to our view as exploring the depths of science, but as searching into the counsels of Divine love. The mystery of Redemption occupies their attention. The sufferings of Christ, and the riches of his grace, they contemplate with rapture: “That now,” says the Apostle, “unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God.” And

again, speaking of the prophecies which had been delivered of the grace of Christ, he adds, “which things the angels desired to look into.” Thus, also are the cherubim represented in the temple as stooping over the Mercy-seat, astonished at the grace of God manifested to man, and adoring the great Author of it. In this employment then, let us imitate the angels. Can we have a nobler object of contemplation than theirs? Can we exhaust that glorious subject which instructs and amazes even them? Here is a subject really sublime and profound, fit to exercise the noblest faculties of the mind—the mercy, the love, the wisdom, the power of God, displayed in the great mystery of Redemption. Let us be ashamed to feel so little interested in contemplations, in which it is the highest dignity of angels to be engaged.

2. Next. The angels may be considered as our examples, in their *adoration of God*.—Man worships God, and so also do the angels of God: and how do they worship him? Is it a faint and languid, a cold and formal adoration which they offer up when the host of heaven fall prostrate before the throne, and cry with a loud voice, “Salvation, and glory, and honour, be unto Him that sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever?” If then, we would learn how to adore God, let us consider their worship. In them we see perfect knowledge combined with perfect love, bending and stimulating every faculty of the soul to offer up a spiritual sacrifice worthy of the great Being to whom it is offered.

3. Again: the angels are examples also in *harmony*. —Could we look into heaven, we should see but one will, and, as it were but, one soul, pervading the multitude of the heavenly host. The united song of the seraphim was, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hosts: heaven and earth are full of his glory.” On earth we meet together, it is true, in the house of God; we kneel at the same moment, we rise together, we listen together to the word of God; but we agree, perhaps, only in these outward circumstances. In the ears of the Lord of hosts, our melody is often discord; for he looks at the heart, and there he beholds corrupt' imaginations, earthly affections, wandering thoughts, unhallowed passions, polluting the service, and jarring with the offering of our lips. But in heaven, as voice answers to voice, so the will meets the will, affections mingle with affections, hearts unite with hearts. All is concord, all harmony; and, as if it were the offering of one instead of myriads of spirits, the worship is one unbroken sacrifice and one uninterrupted song.

4. Next, they are models also in their *love to God*. How little soever the great Ruler of the universe may be honoured and beloved upon earth, there is no want of love to him in the courts above. Those blessed spirits know not a cold and lukewarm regard to their Creator and Benefactor. *They love*

him, as *we* ought, with all their heart, and soul, and strength. Such is the ardour with which their affections kindle and ascend to God, but they are compared to “flames of fire;” —“who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.” They are as “flames of fire,” in the ardour and promptitude of their affections.

5. Thus also they are our models in *obedience*.— Our Lord himself has in this respect proposed them as examples to us, when he teaches us to pray that God’s “will may be done on earth, as it is by the angels of heaven.” In what manner, then, do they perform it? I answer, constantly, readily, universally, cheerfully. They have no choice, no will of their own. They choose the will of God. They alike obey and rejoice, whether they be sent to direct the affairs of an empire, or to bring a meal to Elijah in the desert. It is not the employment, but the Governor who appoints it, to whom they bear respect.

Thus, then, my brethren, you see what noble examples you are taught to propose to yourselves. Lift your eyes above the frail children of men around you. If you take the measure of your duty from the worms of the earth, who are as corrupt, as ignorant, as sordid as yourself, your conceptions must be gross, your practice low, your ideas of holiness itself mean and base; therefore raise your thoughts to another world, and behold its blessed inhabitants. These are displayed to you as examples by God himself. They are also placed before you as your associates for ever.

IV. But this brings me to the last head; in which I am to shew, that real Christians are come to the innumerable company of angels, as to their *associates*.

Here, upon earth, the Christian is an associate with angels by faith, by hope, by communion, by anticipation. But hereafter we, if we be indeed Christians, shall be more intimately united to them. They now rejoice in our penitence, because they see another name written in heaven. They anxiously await the hour of our death, that they may see another soul enter into glory;—with them, so bright, so glorious, so excellent, has it pleased God of his infinite mercy to fix our eternal habitation. Oh, blessed society, from which all envy, and pride, and anger, and emulation, and strife, shall be for ever excluded! where there will be but one employment, one spirit, one heart, one object,—the glory of our Father and their Father, of our God and their God!

There is one reflection with which I beg to close these observations. How awful is the thought, that every person, who now hears me, is united either to the devils or to the angels! To the eye of sense we seem to be all mingled together in one body; but, if the veil which conceals the invisible world

were removed, we should discover a distinction as clear as will appear when the angels shall separate the wicked and the righteous. God and satan divide the world. Each has his angels subordinate to him. The “god of this world,” emphatically and awfully so styled, on account of the number of subjects he at present possesses, “rules in the children of disobedience” by his evil spirits; while God sends his “angels to minister to them that are the heirs of salvation.” And, according to the success of the good and evil angels, in moulding their respective charges to their own nature and character, the objects of their respective superintendence will rejoice with angels, or suffer with devils for ever. Thou, therefore, who openest thy mouth in blasphemy and cursing against God; thou who endeavourest to subvert the government of God, and to loosen the grasp which the obligations of his truth have upon the mind; thou who tramplest upon his laws; thou who slightest the ordinances of his grace, the worship of God, and the word of God:—is it not evident to whom thou art united? Art thou not doing the work of devils? Art thou not already associated with them? Art thou not “treasuring up for thyself wrath against the day of wrath?” Oh! let me conjure you to pause, to consider, to repent! Even for you there is hope. Behold the glorious company of angels. They desire to receive you: they stretch forth their hands to you. In their holy zeal to reclaim the wicked, and to enlarge their blessed society, they carry the everlasting Gospel to all nations. Will you renounce them, to have fellowship with devils? Oh, turn to God, that you may be added to this innumerable company! And *you* who, through Jesus Christ, are thus united to and associated with angels, see that you do the work of angels. Be conformed to them in your tempers and views. Live like them here, as the best, the only, preparation for an eternal residence and communion with them hereafter. In the contemplation of this glorious prospect, who shall not adopt the exclamation of the Psalmist? “Bless the Lord, ye his angels that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word. Bless ye the Lord, all ye his host; ye ministers of his that do his pleasure. Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul.”