

SERMONS

BY THE

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SERMON VI.

STATE OF THE SAINTS ABOVE CONTRASTED WITH THEIR FORMER CONDITION BELOW.

(FOR ALL-SAINTS' DAY.)

REV. vii. 9–17.

After this I beheld, and lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the Throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, saying, Amen: blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever: Amen. And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne, shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

ON this day, consecrated to devout meditation on a future state and a heavenly inheritance—within these hallowed walls, in which we feebly attempt to emulate the worship, the feelings, and the employments of the blessed spirits above;—on this festival, dedicated to the pious commemoration of the saints who have slept in Christ, and are now with him in joy and felicity; let us endeavour, my Christian brethren, by the help of God, to detach our thoughts for a few happy moments from the alluring scenes below; from the tumults, the anxieties, the trouble's, the vicissitudes, the fears, the follies, the vanities, the corruptions, of this sinful world; and fix them, in devout contemplation, on that glorious state and that blessed assembly of which so delightful a picture has been just presented to us. It is

a picture rendered sacred by the recollection that it describes the felicity of those beloved friends who were once our companions and guides upon earth; who departed hence in Christian faith and hope; and to whom our souls yet cleave in all the union of the tenderest affection. It is a picture endeared to us by the humble hope that it describes the happiness which we ourselves shall one day enjoy, when our warfare has been accomplished, our labours finished, our sorrows ended, and our released spirits have “entered into the joy of our Lord.”

“I beheld,” says the Apostle (admitted, for the consolation of the church, to witness and record the happiness of the saints in heaven); “I beheld, and lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the Throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.”—O what a different scene, what a different world, separated only by a slight veil from that which we inhabit, is here exhibited to our view!—a world into which we may enter by a single step, and in a moment of time! Here we see a busy world, eager in vain pursuits, agitated by mere trifles, contending about objects of no moment, and immersed in things which perish with the using. All is noise, and confusion, and vanity, and sorrow, and evil. But behold another world, nigh at hand, composed of different beings, governed by different principles; where all things are as substantial, as here they are vain; where all things are as momentous, as here they are frivolous; where all things are as great, as here they are little; where all things are as durable, as here they are transitory; where all things are as fixed, as here they are mutable! That world has also its inhabitants—so numerous, that the population of this world is but as a petty tribe compared to them. It has its employments; but they are of the noblest kind and weightiest import; and compared with them, the whole sum of the concerns of this life is but as a particle of dust. It has its pleasures; but they are pure and spotless, holy and divine. There, perfect happiness, and uninterrupted harmony, and righteousness and peace, ever prevail. What a contrast to our present state!—And is this blessed scene near us? Is there but, as it were, a step between? May we be called into it in a moment? With what anxious solicitude, then, should we endeavour to realize it! And how ardently should we desire to be prepared for an admission into it!

The number of the blessed inhabitants of heaven is represented as infinite: “I beheld, and lo, a great multitude, which no man could number.” And if we consider the infinite power and glory of Him who created them; the magnificence and even profusion displayed in the works of His hands; the end and design for which they were created—namely, to manifest His glory; we shall at once feel that their number must be, in the fullest sense of the word, infinite. Let us reflect, that to create a million, or a million of

millions, of the brightest and most glorious spirits, is as easy to the Almighty, as it was to create our first parents: He has but to will, and it is done. Let us consider, that he rejoices in the multitude of his works; that every part of the universe is filled with being—from the immeasurable system of worlds, to the atom whose minuteness eludes the keenest sight. Let us reflect, that heaven is the perfection of his works, the grand scene of his glory, the immediate place of his residence. There he is to be known, and adored, and glorified; there he is to receive the homage so justly due to his majesty. And shall this part of his works alone be scantily peopled? Shall those realms alone, which he made for himself, be without inhabitant? Shall heaven alone be a blank in the creation?—Our Lord, it is true, hath said, speaking of the race of man, that “narrow is the way which leadeth to life, and few there be that enter in thereat;” but this expression relates solely to the earth we inhabit—one world amidst, perhaps, an innumerable multitude. It relates also, principally, to the time in which our Lord lived. Even this world, we trust, will not ultimately be barren, but produce numerous and faithful witnesses to the glory of the Redeemer. He made this earth the scene of his sufferings, and we may expect it to become the scene of his triumph. Only allow the Gospel of Christ to prevail, as the Prophets lead us to hope that in the latter days it will prevail; allow the world to continue, as here is ground to expect it will continue, to a period of which the infancy has scarcely yet passed; and we may well conclude, that even from this fallen world shall multitudes, as numerous as the drops of the morning dew, crowd into the realms of light, to ascribe glory, and praise, and honour, to Him that sitteth on the throne, and to the Lamb, for ever.”

In considering the multitudes, beyond the power of calculation, which will people the realms of bliss, we must recollect, that there multitudes constitute happiness. On the earth, where a difficulty of subsistence is often experienced; where there exists a constant collision of interests; where one stands in the way of another; where jealousies and envyings, anger and revenge, pride and vanity, agitate and deform the world; numbers may tend to diffuse wretchedness, and to multiply evil. Hence we flee for peace and joy from the crowded haunts of men, and court the sequestered habitation and the retired vale. But in heaven, where there can be no thwarting interests; where the wants of one are never supplied at the expense of another; where every bosom glows with love, and every heart beats with desire to promote the general happiness; the addition of a fresh individual to the innumerable throng diffuses a wider joy, and heightens the universal felicity.

The multitude assembled there is described as composed of “all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues.”—Here, again, we must beware of forming our judgment from the feelings and views of this fallen world. There, it will be no cause of jealousy, or rivalry, or hatred, that one person received his birth on this, and another on that, side of a river or sea. A man will not despise his brother on account of the different shade of his complexion: he will not seek his destruction because he spoke in another language, nor renounce communion with him because he praised the same God, with the same spirit of piety, in a house of a different form. All these petty distinctions will have either ceased to exist or will be completely annihilated in the general spirit of love which will then animate every mind. One pursuit will occupy every heart; each will strive only to glorify God. There will either be no distinctions, or the distinctions be like the beautiful variety we see in the works of God, —like flowers enriched with different colours to delight the eye, or with various perfumes to gratify the smell. Why should distinctions offend, or variety disgust? It is the dark and selfish pride of the heart which considers itself as the only standard of right and excellence; and therefore despises or hates every deviation from itself. Let the pride be removed, and the distinction would become a pleasing variety, instead of a source of hatred.

Alas, alas! what petty differences, engendered by pride, and nursed by the worst passions of the human breast, here separate, with unchristian hatred, those who are brethren, the children of the same God, the members of the same church, taught by the same book, partakers of the same hope, redeemed by the same Saviour, influenced by the same Spirit, travelling along the same road towards the same blessed country! Oh, Religion! our best, our dearest, holiest guide! is thy sacred name to be prostituted, is thy divine aim to be perverted, to sanction discord, to justify hatred, and to consecrate bigotry? No! Religion acknowledges nothing as her own work, but union and peace. In heaven, her throne, no odious denominations will parcel out the regenerated church, no frivolous distinctions be suffered to break the unity of the members of Christ; but people of every nation, and kindred, and tribe, and tongue, will unite in one worship, will be animated with one spirit, will be actuated by one principle—and that the principle of pure and universal love.

The society of that blessed place is composed of “angels” and “saints;”—of those, that is, who have never sinned against God; and those who, having sinned, have been redeemed by the Cross of Christ, and have “washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb;”—of those who were created, and have continued, in the highest order of bright and glorious spirits; and those who once were dead in trespasses and sins,” who “walked according to the course of this world, according

to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience,” but who have been “quicken together with Christ, and raised up together with him, and made to sit together,” with angels, and with the Lord of angels, “in heavenly places.” Yet the angels scorn not such society; they reproach not the children of men with their fall: they refuse not to receive them into their company. On the contrary, they “rejoice” when any “sinner repenteth;” they convey the departed Lazarus into Abraham’s bosom; they become ministering spirits to the heirs of salvation;” they worship with them in the same adorations; they answer in responsive chorus to their praises. What a model for the conduct and worship of the saints below

The employment of that innumerable company is represented as that of praise “to God, and to the Lamb,” who redeemed them and bought them with his blood.—In other parts of the sacred writings, where the employments of heaven are described, worship and praise are represented as the chief occupation. We are not, however, to infer from this, that the exclusive employment is religious adoration; for we know that the angels, beings of a still higher order and more spiritual nature, are frequently engaged in active commissions to execute the will of God. What are the precise occupations of the “spirits of the just made perfect,” we indeed know not; nor could we, perhaps, comprehend them. It is sufficient for us to rest assured that they are occupied in that work for which they are best qualified. It is sufficient for us to know, that, whatever the employments are which their Creator and Redeemer assigns to them, they are such as must tend to produce the greatest happiness, and to excite new and continual praises to God; for, in every description which is given us of the heavenly world, it is the voice of incessant praise and thanksgiving we hear; it is the overflowing of thankfulness for a state of exquisite enjoyment; it is the universal burst of gratitude, extending from one boundary of heaven to the other. The voice of prayer itself is lost in the exultations of praise; the language of complaint is unknown; the lamentations of sorrow, and the sighs of grief, are never heard.

The happiness of that innumerable company is described in the most glowing colours:—“They shall hunger no more, nor thirst any more. The sun shall not light on them” (to scorch them), “nor any heat” (molest them). “The Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne, shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of water; and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”—Here we see every source of evil, and even of inconvenience, removed, and every good bestowed, by the unrestrained bounty of Heaven. Descriptions of this kind must be figurative; but the figures are evidently intended to convey to us the highest possible conception of unqualified good, and the total absence of all evil.

The remaining part of the description both manifests the nature and the source of the happiness which they enjoy. They are “before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.” The happiness which they enjoy is, then, a refined and holy happiness. It is not the happiness of a Mahometan paradise, but such as is suited to spiritual beings of the highest order and most exalted taste. It is a happiness founded upon religion and devotion, upon near and intimate access to the Lord of life and glory. And let not this happiness be judged of by those who, far from having enjoyed pleasure arising from such a source, have, on the contrary, experienced from it only pain and restraint. They know not what religion is, nor are capable of appreciating its nature and excellence. To others, it will be sufficient to state, that religion is but another word for happiness. I do not mean this merely in the sense in which, without guarding them, the words may be understood—viz. that the effect produced by religion is happiness. I use the words literally; and design to state that religion itself, the act and exercise of it, is the purest and highest happiness.—It may here be necessary to rectify the general definition of religion. Religion is not merely the worship of God, or the exercise of obedience: it is the union of the soul with God; the conformity of the will with his will; the enjoyment of communion with him; and the transformation of every faculty of the soul to his image and likeness. Religion, here, is but the faint outline of this more sublime image of its nature; the outward expression of what it ought to be, and of what it is above. Now happiness arises from a frame of mind harmonizing with the objects which surround us. When the soul, therefore, is moulded into the perfect frame of religion in its most exalted state; when every affection and every faculty are put into perfect tune, and all are in unison with the Divine Source of all good; there must be happiness, arising from such a constitution, the most pure and perfect which a creature can enjoy. It is the happiness of God himself—of God, the Source of all happiness. It is a state of mind in which that necessarily gives pleasure which gives Him pleasure; in which there is a participation of His feelings; in which the soul drinks at the Fountain-Head of all enjoyment; in which the bliss of the Almighty becomes the bliss of his creatures. Thus religion and happiness are convertible terms. They are, in fact, one and the same thing: and it is not more impossible that God should be unhappy, than that his devout servants, dwelling near his throne, and “serving him day and night in his temple,” should taste of misery.

To what an exalted height of happiness and glory, my Christian brethren, is then that “innumerable company” advanced! With what a glorious society do they hold communion! In what noble employments are they engaged; of what refined enjoyments do they partake! Blessed spirits!

your lot is fixed; your happiness is permanent and eternal. You will suffer pain or feel distress no more. Your minds are cleansed from every taint of sin; your breasts are the everlasting abode of purity and joy. All around you is peace. Everything is concerted, by Almighty Wisdom and Infinite Goodness, to banish the very elements of evil; to dispel the slightest shade of misery; to pour around you, in luxuriant profusion—a profusion designating the infinitely varied power of the Giver—all the richest stores of good.—How unlike this is our present state! What a different abode is this world below! Here, fear and terror, danger and violence, pain and suffering, sin and remorse, misery and grief, poverty and labour, the curse and the frown of Justice, have fixed their abode.—But, my brethren, though “these days be evil,” give not way to despair. Let me now present to you this innumerable company under a different aspect. Let me point out to you what was their former, as well as what is their present, state. Once, these were “men of like passions with yourselves;”—“they have come out of great tribulation;”—they once sighed and groaned under sufferings and sorrows as deep and grievous as those by which any of you are afflicted. Oh! what an invaluable and sure source of consolation is it, to every pious Christian suffering under the weight of worldly calamities, to direct his contemplation to this glorious host above! Standing before the Throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and with palms in their hands, methinks they say to him,—“We were once as you are; we were assaulted by the same temptations; we were stricken by the same arrows; we drank deep of the same bitter cup; we combated with the same enemies; we felt all the sharpness and bitterness of the Christian warfare. Often were we ready to faint; often we cried to God in an agony of grief, on the point of being swallowed up in despair. We felt all the weakness of our faith, and trembled under the infirmities of our common nature. Faint not therefore in your course. Behold the “cloud of witnesses” surrounding you. With one voice they bid you “lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees.” “Be strong, fear not; your God will come: he will come with a recompense, and save you.”

Oh, my brethren in Christ! my flock whom I long to present to God “meet for the inheritance of the saints in light,” and prepared to join their innumerable company, let me conjure every weak and every afflicted brother amongst you, to contemplate these blessed inhabitants of heaven. How changed are they from what they once were! Praises incessantly occupy those tongues which once breathed out only complaints, and told of fears and apprehensions. Not a complaint can you make which they have not made: not a temptation can you describe to which they were not exposed. All your weakness they felt: all your trials they endured. Some, like Lazarus, were afflicted with poverty; some, like Job, were plunged from

the height of prosperity to the lowest depth of adversity; some, like David, were harassed by severe persecutions; some, like Lot, were vexed by the unrighteousness of those around them; some, like Eli, were cursed with unrighteous children; some, like Peter, were shut up in prison; some, like Manasses, felt all the anguish of remorse; some, like the Apostles and the noble army of martyrs, were stoned or sawn asunder;— yet, now, their sufferings have been long forgotten, or are remembered only to bless God, who “counted them worthy to suffer for his Name’s sake.” One moment spent in heaven effaces for ever the afflictions endured upon earth. Oh! look to them, then, and indulge the delightful hope that one day “God may wipe away all tears from your eyes,” and compensate all your sufferings.

For the better confirmation of your faith, let me, lastly, refer you to the means by which this wonderful change was accomplished in them: “They washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” They bear in their hands the “palm,” as an emblem of victory in the good fight of faith; and they are “clothed with white robes,” to denote the purity of their hearts under the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit.—The first point to which our attention is here directed is that “blood of the Lamb” in which their “robes have been washed and made white.” This image is designed to show, that it was to the efficacy of the death of Christ they trusted as the atonement for their sins. Christ was to them the “hope of glory;” that is, they founded all their hope of glory upon him. Their robes were formerly defiled and stained by sin; but they were “washed, they were cleansed, they were justified, they were glorified” by Christ. He it was who gave them heaven, and who gave them the preparation for it. He is the Lord of the world above; he has the “keys of death and hell;” he “openeth, and no man shutteth; and he shutteth, and no man openeth.” To him, trusting in his grace and mercy, they applied, as to the Saviour of mankind; and he heard their cry, and was gracious and merciful unto them. He delivered them out of the “terrible pit and the mire, and set their feet upon a rock.” Behold then, my brethren, the secret source of the wonderful change wrought in them—this grand translation from earth to heaven, from ruin to glory. The Son of God came down from heaven “to seek and to save those that were lost.” They heard of his love; they needed his power; they approached him in faith; they received him as their Lord;— and he acknowledged them as his disciples, interceded for them, delivered them out of their distresses, and raised them to eternal glory. And, O my brethren! is his “arm shortened, that it cannot save? Is his ear heavy, that it cannot hear?” Has he intermitted his gracious work? Are there no new trophies of his power to be suspended in the kingdom of glory? Yes! he is “the same yesterday, today, and for ever.” Approach him, then, with true faith and fervent prayer; “fight the good fight of faith,” as they did, and

you also shall receive the palm of victory. Seek for the sanctifying influence of the Spirit, and you shall receive the robe of righteousness granted to them.