

THE UPPER ROOM,

AND OTHER SERMONS DELIVERED
ON IMPORTANT PUBLIC OCCASIONS

BEING

A FEW TRUTHS FOR THE TIMES.

BY THE RIGHT REV.

BISHOP RYLE, D.D.,

AUTHOR OF

"EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS," "KNOTS UNTIED," ETC., ETC.

"If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself
to the battle?"—1 Cor. xiv. 8.

LONDON:

CHAS. J. THYNNE,

WYCLIFFE HOUSE,

6, GREAT QUEEN STREET, LINCOLN'S INN, W.C.

1887

Preface

The volume now in the reader's hands requires little introductory explanation. It contains a very miscellaneous selection of papers which I have sent forth from time to time, in one shape or another, during a forty-five years' ministry. Some of these papers are not known beyond a small circle of kind friends. Not a few of them are the substance of pulpit addresses delivered on important public occasions, and composed with more than ordinary pains. All of them, I venture humbly to think, will be found to contain some useful truths for the times, and words in season.

I have reached an age when I cannot reasonably expect to write much more. There are many thoughts in this volume which I do not wish to leave behind me in the precarious form of separate single sermons, addresses, lectures, and tracts. I have therefore resolved to gather them together in the volume I now send forth, which I heartily pray God to bless, and to make it a permanent blessing to many souls.

J. C. LIVERPOOL

PALACE, LIVERPOOL

December 1 1887.

“THEY WENT UP INTO AN UPPER ROOM.”¹

ACTS i. 13.

WE are told in these simple words what the Apostles did immediately after the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven. Fresh from the wonderful and touching sight of their beloved Master being taken away from them,—with the message brought by angels, bidding them expect His Second Advent, still ringing in their ears,—they returned from Mount Olivet to Jerusalem, and went at once “into an upper room.” Simple as the words are, they are full of suggestive thoughts, and deserve the close attention of all into whose hands this volume may fall.

Let us fix our eyes for a few minutes on the first place of meeting of Christians for worship of which we have any record. Let us examine the first congregation which assembled after the great Head of the Church had left the world, and left His people to themselves. Let us see who these first worshippers were, and how they behaved, and what they did. I venture to think that a little quiet contemplation of the subject may do us good.

This “upper room,” we should remember, was the forerunner of every church and cathedral which has been reared in Christendom within the last eighteen centuries. St. Paul’s, and York, and Lincoln, and all the stately minsters of our own land; St. Sophia at Constantinople, St. Isaac at St. Petersburg, St. Stephen’s at Vienna, Notre Dame at Paris, St. Peter’s at Rome — all are descendants from this “upper room.” Not one can trace its pedigree beyond that little chamber. Here it was that professing Christians, when left alone by their Master, first began to pray together, to worship, and to exhort one another. This room was the cradle of the infant Church of Christ, and the beginning of all our services. From this room the waters of the everlasting gospel first began to flow, which have now spread so widely throughout the world, however adulterated and corrupted they may have been in some ages and in some parts of the earth. I invite my readers, then, to come with me and examine this upper room as it appeared on Ascension day.

I. There are *certain points arising naturally out of the text before us* which appear to demand special notice. Let us see what they are.

Concerning the shape and size and form of this room, we know nothing at all. It was probably like many other “upper rooms” in Jerusalem. But whether it was lofty, or low, or square, or round; whether it stood east, and west, or north and south; whether it was ornamented or decorated or perfectly plain,

¹ The substance of this paper was originally delivered as a sermon at the consecration of St. Agnes’ Church, Liverpool.

we have not the slightest information, and the matter signifies very little. But it is a striking and noteworthy fact that in the original Greek it is called *the* upper room, and not *an* upper room, as our Authorized Version calls it. I venture to think that there is much in this. I believe there is the highest probability that this was the very room in which our Lord first appointed the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and in which the Apostles first heard those well-known words, "Take, eat; this is My body,"—"Drink ye all of this, for this is My blood,"—those famous words which have been the cause of so much unhappy controversy with some, but the source of such mighty comfort to others.—I believe it was the same room in which the disciples were "in the habit of abiding" during the fifty days between the Resurrection and Pentecost. Here, again, the original Greek helps us to a conclusion, if literally translated.—I believe it is the same room in which the disciples were assembled with "the doors shut for fear of the Jews," when the Lord Jesus suddenly appeared in the midst of them after His resurrection, and said, "Peace be unto you: as My Father sent Me, so send I you;" and "breathed on them, saying, Receive ye the Holy Ghost." (John xx. 21, 22.)—I believe it is the same room in which, a week afterwards, He appeared again, and rebuked the scepticism of doubting Thomas, saying, "Be not faithless, but believing."—I believe it is the same room in which our Lord appeared, and did eat before His disciples, and said, "Handle Me, and see: a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see Me have." (Luke xxiv. 39.) On all these points I freely grant that I have nothing but conjectures to put before my readers. But they are conjectures which appear to me to be founded on the highest possible probability, and as such I think they demand our reverent consideration. But we may now turn boldly from conjectures, and look at things which are most plainly and unmistakably revealed.

(1) Let us then, first and foremost, look at *the worshippers* who were gathered together in this first place of Christian worship.

Peter was there, that warm-hearted, impulsive, but unstable Apostle, who, forty days before, denied his Master three times, and then repented with bitter tears, and who had been graciously raised by our Lord, and commanded to "feed His sheep." (John xxi. 16, 17.)

James was there, who had been the favoured companion of Peter and John on three important occasions, and who was the first of the Apostles to seal his faith with his blood, and drink of the cup which his Master drank. (Matt. xx. 23.)

John was there, the other son of Zebedee, the beloved Apostle, whose head lay on our Lord's breast at the Last Supper,—John, the first on the lake of Galilee, when our Lord appeared to the disciples as they were fishing, who cried out with instinctive love, "It is the Lord,"—John, who at one time

wished to call down fire from heaven on a village of the Samaritans, but lived to write three Epistles brimming over with love. (John xxi. 7; Luke ix. 54.)

Andrew was there, the first of all the Apostles whose name we know, who followed Jesus after hearing the words, “Behold the Lamb of God,” and then brought his brother Peter to Jesus, saying, “We have found the Messiah.” (John i. 40, 41.)

Philip of Bethsaida was there, the first Apostle to whom Jesus said, “Follow Me,”—the Apostle who told Nathanael to “come and see” the promised Messiah. (John i. 43.)

Thomas was there, who was once so desponding and weak in faith, but afterwards cried out with such grand Athanasian confidence, “My Lord and my God.” (John xx. 28.)

Bartholomew was there, who, by general consent, is the same as that very Nathanael who at first said, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Yet this is he whom our Lord pronounced to be “an Israelite without guile,” and who said, “Thou art the Son of God, Thou art the King of Israel.” (John i. 46-49.)

Matthew the publican was there, who forsook his worldly calling at the bidding of our Lord, and sought lasting treasure in heaven, and who was afterwards privileged to hold the pen which wrote the first Gospel. (Matt. ix. 9.)

James the son of Alphæus was there, who had the honour of being the presiding Apostle at the first Council held in Jerusalem, and of whom St. Paul tells the Galatians that, together with Peter and John, James was a “pillar of the Church.” (Gal. ii. 9.)

Simon Zelotes was there, of whom we know little certain except that he was also “called the Canaanite,” and may possibly have lived at Cana of Galilee, and seen the first miracle our Lord worked. His name Zelotes seems to indicate that he was once a member of the famous Zealot party, a fierce advocate of Jewish home-rule, and an enemy of Roman supremacy. He was now zealous only for the kingdom of Christ.

Judas was there, the brother of James, called also Lebbæus or Thaddæus, the writer of the last Epistle in the New Testament, and the Apostle who asked the remarkable question, “How is it that Thou wilt manifest Thyself unto us and not unto the world?” (John xiv. 22). In short, the whole company of the eleven faithful Apostles was assembled in that “upper room.” On this occasion there were no absentees; and doubting Thomas was among the rest.

But there were others present beside the Apostles. The “women” were there of whom some had long followed our Lord and ministered to His necessities, and been last at the Cross, and first at the tomb. I have little doubt that Mary Magdalene and Salome, and Susanna, and Joanna the wife of

Chuza, Herod's steward, formed part of the company. (Luke viii. 2, 3.) And Mary the mother of Jesus was there, whom our Lord had committed to the special care of John; and where he was, she was sure to be. Truly the prophecy of old Simeon had been fulfilled in her case. "The sword" of deep and keen sorrow had pierced "through her soul." (Luke ii. 35.) For she was only flesh and blood, like any other woman. This is the last occasion on which her name appears in the pages of Holy Scripture. From henceforth she sinks out of sight, and all stories about her after-life are mere baseless traditions.

And, finally, our Lord's "brethren" were there. They were his cousins in all probability, or the sons of Joseph by a former marriage. Never let it be forgotten that at one time they did not believe on Jesus (John vii. 5); but now their unbelief was gone, and they were true disciples, while Judas Iscariot had fallen away. The mention of them teaches the grand lesson that men may begin ill, and end well, and that many who now seem faithless may one day believe. So true it is that the last are sometimes first, and the first last.

Such was the congregation which assembled in the "upper room" after the Ascension. Never, I suppose, has there been such a pure and spotless gathering of Christians from that day down to this. Never has there been, and probably never will be, such a near approach to the "one Holy Catholic Church," the "mystical body of the Son of God, which is the blessed company of all faithful people." Never has there been together so much wheat without tares, and such a singular proportion of grace, and penitence, and faith, and hope, and holiness, and love in one room together. Well would it be for the visible Church of Christ if all her assemblies were as free from unsound members, spots, and blemishes as the congregation which met together in the "upper room."

(2) We should notice, secondly, *the unity* which characterized this first meeting in the "upper room." We are told expressly, "that they were all there with one accord," that is, of one mind. There were no divisions among them. They believed the same thing. They loved the same Person, and at present there was no disagreement among them. There was nothing of High, or Low, or Broad in that "upper room." Heresies, and strifes, and controversies were as yet unknown. Neither about baptism, or the Lord's Supper, or vestments, or incense, was there any contention or agitation. Happy would it have been for Christendom if this blessed state of things had continued! At the end of eighteen centuries we all know, by bitter experience, that the divisions of Christians are the weakness of the Church, and the favourite argument of the world, the infidel, and the devil against revealed religion. Well may we pray, when we see this blessed picture of the upper room, that God would heal the many ecclesiastical diseases of the nineteenth century, and make Churchmen especially become more of one mind.

(3) We should notice, thirdly, the *devotional habits* of this first congregation in the “upper room.” We are told expressly that they “were continuing in prayer and supplication.” Here, again, we should mark the original Greek. The expression denotes that prayer was a continued and habitual practice at this crisis. What things these holy worshippers prayed for we are not told. Like our Lord’s discourse with the two Apostles journeying to Emmaus, one would like to know what their prayers were. (Luke xxiv. 27.) We need not doubt that there was much prayer for grace to be faithful and not fall away,—for wisdom to do the thing that was right in the new and difficult position which they had to take up,—for courage, for patience, for unwearied zeal, for abiding recollection of our Lord’s example, our Lord’s teaching, and our Lord’s promises. But in perfect wisdom the Holy Ghost has thought fit to keep back these things from us, and we must not doubt that this is right. One thing, at any rate, is quite certain. We are taught clearly that nothing is such a primary duty of a Christian assembly as united prayer and supplication. Let us never forget the first charge which the great Apostle of the Gentiles gave to Timothy when he wrote to him about his duties as a minister of the Church, “I exhort, therefore, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men; for kings and all that are in authority, that we may live a quiet and peaceable life.” (1 Tim. ii. 1, etc.) I dare to believe that the names of Annas, Caiaphas, and Pontius Pilate were not forgotten in the supplications and intercessions of the “upper room.”

(4) We should notice, lastly, *the address given in this upper room* by the Apostle Peter, on one of the ten days which elapsed between the Ascension and the day of Pentecost. It is an interesting fact that this is the first address which is recorded to have been given to any assembly of Christians after the Lord left the world. It is no less interesting that the first speaker was the Apostle Peter,—the very Apostle who, after denying his Master, had been mercifully raised again, and commanded to prove his love by feeding His sheep,—the very Apostle who had received a charge before his fall, “When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.” (Luke xxii. 32.) There was a peculiar fitness in Peter being the first to stand up and address the little company of “one hundred and twenty names.”

(a) Mark how he begins his address with a reverent *reference to Holy Scripture*. He puts down his foot firmly on the supremacy of God’s written Word as the Church’s rule of faith. He says, “This scripture must needs have been fulfilled.” He says, “It is written in the book of Psalms,” and takes a quotation for his text. Well and wisely does the late Dean Alford remark in his *Homilies on the Acts*: “The first act of the Church by her first superinten-

dent minister was an appeal to the text of Scripture. Let that never be forgotten. Would that every appeal by every one of her ministers since had been an appeal equally direct and equally justified!"

(b) Mark, next, how Peter humbly acknowledges the *liability of the highest and most privileged ministers of the Church to fall*. He says of Judas Iscariot, "He was numbered with us, and had obtained part of this ministry," and then mentions his miserable end. "He fell by transgression," and then "went to his own place." Let that also never be forgotten. He lays down the grand principle, which should always be remembered in the Church, that no infallibility belongs to the ministerial office. A chosen Apostle of Christ fell sadly, and so also may any successor of the Apostles. Bishops, priests, and deacons may err, and have erred greatly, like Hophni, and Phinehas, and Annas, and Caiaphas, who were in direct succession to Aaron. We are never to suppose that ordained and consecrated men can make no mistakes. We are never to follow them blindly, or to believe as a matter of course that all they say is truth. The Bible is the only infallible guide.

(c) Mark, next, how he calls upon the Church *to fill up the place which Judas had left vacant*, and to choose one who might be numbered with the eleven Apostles. He speaks with unflinching confidence, like one convinced that a work was beginning which the world and the devil could never stop, and that workmen must be appointed to carry it on in regular order. He speaks with a clear foresight of the battles the Church would have to fight, but with an evident conviction that they would not be fought in vain, and that the final issue was sure. He seems to say, "Stand firm, though a standard-bearer has fallen away. Fill up the gap. Close up your ranks."

(d) Mark, lastly, how he winds up his address with a *plain declaration of what a minister and successor of the Apostles ought to be*. He was to be "a witness of Christ's resurrection." He was to be a witness to the fact that the foundation of the Gospel is not a vague idea of God's mercy, but an actual living Person, a Person who lived for us, died for us, and above all, rose again. Let that also never be forgotten. I affirm, without hesitation, that in these latter days we do not make enough of the resurrection of Christ. We certainly do not make as much of it as the Apostles did, judging from the Acts and the Epistles. When Paul went to Athens, we are told that "he preached Jesus and the resurrection." (Acts xvii. 18.) When he went to Corinth, one of the first truths he proclaimed was, that "Christ rose again according to the Scriptures." (1 Cor. xv. 4.) When the same Paul was brought before Festus and Agrippa, Festus said that the complaint against him was about "one Jesus who was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive." (Acts xxv. 19.)

Let no one misunderstand my meaning. I do not say that we dwell too much on the sacrifice and the blood of Christ, but I do contend that we dwell

too little on His resurrection. Yet our Lord Himself told the Jews more than once that the resurrection would prove Him to be the Messiah. St. Paul told the Romans, in the beginning of his Epistle, that Jesus was “declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.” (Rom. i. 4.) The resurrection completed the work of redemption, which our Lord came into the world to effect. It is written, that “He was delivered for our offences, and raised again for our justification,” and the Corinthians are expressly told, “If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.” (Rom. iv. 25; 1 Cor. xv. 17.) In short, Christ’s resurrection is one of the grandest evidences of the truth of Christianity, a foundation proof that the salvation of sinners by the vicarious atonement is a finished work, and a miracle which the cleverest infidels have never been able to explain away. Until it is explained away, we need not be troubled by carping remarks about Balaam’s ass speaking, and Jonah in the whale’s belly. Well indeed would it have been for the Church if all her ministers had always been such as Peter recommended to be appointed, faithful “witnesses” to a personal Christ, His death, and His resurrection.

So much for the upper room at Jerusalem, its congregation, their unity, their prayers, and the first address delivered within its walls. So much for the first prayer meeting, the first sermon, and the first corporate action of the professing Church of which we have any record. We need not doubt for a moment that the well-known promise of our Lord Jesus Christ was fulfilled in that room, “Wheresoever two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matt. xviii. 20.) The little company of worshippers did not see Him; but He was there.

II. Let me now try to draw some *practical lessons* for ourselves from the whole subject.

(1) In the first place, let us learn to be more *thankful for the liberty of the days in which our lot is cast*, and the wise toleration of the Government under which we live in this country. By the mercy of God, “we enjoy great quietness.” We have no need to meet in “upper rooms” with “doors closed for fear of the Jews,” and with a constant feeling that there is but a step between us and a violent death. Men may build places of worship now, if they please, as costly and magnificent as the temple of Jerusalem itself, and no one jealously prohibits or interferes with them. We need not fear Roman Emperors, nor mediæval autocrats, nor Spanish Inquisitions. The land is before us, and men may build and worship as they please. I would to God that all wealthy laymen in this country would remember from whom riches come, and to whom they are indebted for their freedom and prosperity. I would to God that many more

would honour Him with their substance, and come forward more frequently, saying, "Let me build a Church for the service of God."

(2) In the next place, let us learn *the source of true power in the Church*. This little upper room was the starting-point of a movement which shook the Roman Empire, emptied the heathen temples, stopped gladiatorial combats, raised women to their true position, checked infanticide, created a new standard of morality, confounded the old Greek and Roman philosophers, and turned the world upside down. And what was the secret of this power? The unity, the soundness in the faith, the holiness, and the prayers and intercessions of the first professing Christians. Where these things are wanting, the grandest architecture and the most ornate ceremonial will do nothing to mend the world. It is the presence of Christ and the Holy Ghost which alone gives power.

(3) In the last place, let us *pray for the Church of England*, that she may continue faithful to the old truths which have done so much good for 300 years, truths which are embalmed in our Articles, Prayer Book, and Creeds. It is cheap and easy work to sneer at dogma, to scoff at inspiration and the atonement, to make merry at the controversies of Christians, and to tell us that no one really believes all the Bible, or all the facts enumerated in the Belief. It is easy, I repeat, to do this. Even children can cast mud, and throw stones, and make a noise. But sneers, and mud, and noise are not arguments. I challenge those who sneer at dogma to show us a more excellent way, to show us anything that does more good in the world than the old, old story of Christ dying for our sins, and rising again for our justification.

The man of science may say, "Come with me, and look through my microscope or telescope, and I will show you things which Moses, David, and St. Paul never dreamed of. Do you expect me to believe what was written by ignorant fellows like them?"—But can this man of science show us anything through his microscope or telescope which will minister to a mind diseased, bind up the wounds of a broken heart, satisfy the wants of an aching conscience, supply comfort to the mourner over a lost husband, wife, or child? No, indeed! he can do nothing of the kind! Men and women are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are not made up merely of brains, and head, and intellect, and reason. We are frail, dying creatures, who have got hearts, and feelings, and consciences; and we live in a world of sorrow, and disappointment, and sickness, and death. And what can help us in a world like this? Certainly not science alone. Nothing can help us but the doctrine of that volume which some people call an old worn-out Jewish book, the Bible. None can help us but He who was laid in the manger of Bethlehem and died on the cross to pay our debt to God, and is now at God's right hand. None but He who said, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour, and I will give you rest." (Matt.

xi. 28.) None but He who has thrown light on the grave, and the world beyond it, and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel and made a deeper mark on the world than all the men of science who have ever lived, from the times of Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Archimedes, down to Darwin and Huxley in the present day. Yes! I say again, let us pray that our Church may ever be faithful to her first principles, and never lend an ear to those plausible, eloquent apostles of free thought, who would fain persuade her to throw overboard her Creeds and Articles as useless lumber. Fine words and rhetorical fireworks will never satisfy humanity, check moral evil, or feed souls. Men would do well to read that striking paper which Miss Frances Power Cobbe wrote in the *Contemporary Review* for December 1884, and see what a ghastly world our world would be if it was a world without a faith or a creed. The age needs nothing new. It only needs the bold and steady proclamation of the old truths which were held in the “upper room” at Jerusalem.