

CHRISTIAN LOVE.

A Sermon

PREACHED AT THE
MISSION CHAPEL, CHARD, SOMERSET,

On Quinquagesima Sunday, 1878,

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ANNIVERSARY OF THE OPENING OF THAT CHAPEL FOR
DIVINE SERVICE,

BY THE

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CHRISTIAN LOVE.

I Cor. xiii. 13.

“And now abideth Faith, Hope, Charity, these Three ; but the greatest of these is Charity.”

CHARITY is the Alpha and Omega of CHRIST'S Religion, the Beginning and the End. Does this sound too much to say ? Nay then let us change the way of saying it, and say, “Love is the First and the Last :” and this may assuredly be said, for “GOD is Love.”

This word Charity, is, in truth, a spoilt word now. The world's unwholesome air has blighted this flower that was indeed a flower of God's planting. But the world came in, with its pretence of care for the well-being of this blossom of Eden : and truly went nigh to kill it quite. The thing itself drooped, and the name became almost hateful. For the world took up the name with much show of patronage, and as I said, spoilt it. For “Charity Schools,” and

“Charity Children,” and “Charity Balls,” and “Charity Bazaars,” were started by the “charitable world,” and the word even became pluralized, and people wrote and talked complacently about their “charities,” and at last “Charity” became identified in the world’s speech and mind with “Almsgiving.” And this also, in time, became niggardly, and slender, and grudging ; so that the phrase, “living upon Charity” became a reproach, and at last the receivers of unloving gifts threw back into the face of the Pharisaical “charitable world,” the bitter proverb, “cold as Charity.”

Cold as Charity ! Ah, great St. Paul, what would he have said, turning with that Heaven-light on his face, from dictating in divine speech, his poem of Love :—to behold what the Christian world has made of his glowing word, “Charity !”—Niggardly almsgiving, or fashionable amusement :—this all that is left to the so-called religious-world out of his darling word, his “Charity” that never faileth : that suffereth long, and is kind, that envieth not, that vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up : that doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own ; is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil ; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth : beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Yet the glow and the glory are gone from the word, and, spite of his warning, that

men may *give all their goods in alms*,—and have not Charity, yet, in the world's vocabulary, the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table, must be the definition of "Charity" now.

So if we would understand the sweet soft earnest music of the Apostle's utterance, we must let go the marred word, "Charity," and rejoice that we have still the unspoilt word, "Love."

Glorious things are spoken in GOD'S Word, of this thing, "Love." Can more be said than that, "*God is Love*?"—And does not St. Paul shut up the whole duty of man in this word of four letters?—for, he tells us, "*Love is the fulfilling of the Law.*" And St. John, the disciple whom JESUS loved, scarce can he string fifty words without this pearl of words among them : and if he write some times sternly, yet you find always this primrose at the root of his briars. Love. The very name of love, is lovely. "Her very foot has music in it, as it comes up the stairs."

Then consider the *power*, as well as the preciousness of love. "Strong as Death?" Nay, Death is, before the might of Love, weak as tow that has seen the fire ! Even human love defies death's puny power to end it. And look at Calvary, if you would see, once for all, Death's impotence, and the omni-

potence of Love ! Yes, Death is strong ; “ the last enemy that shall be destroyed is Death.” Death is strong, but Love is stronger ;—for God “ shall put all things under His Feet.” Then the strong man armed shall give up his possessions ; and Love “ shall be all in all.”

Love is precious ; and love is mighty. Alas, I may not stop here, my Brethren, but must go on to a sadder word about Love. Sweet, Love is ; and powerful Love is, yes, but also,—*Love is rare*. The thorns and thistles of this world outside of Paradise have spared but few cleared plots for the growth of our one Eden-flower. Its sweetness men mostly pass by with scorn and neglect. Its virtue and its might are but seldom perceived, and more seldom employed. Have we not, in great measure, fallen upon loveless days ?

Not only has Charity been pared down into scanty Almsgiving, but Faith, so-called ; loveless-faith, if such a thing be conceivable, has, among us, dethroned Love. So we, some of us, read the Apostle’s word differently now, “ And now abideth Faith, Hope, Charity : but the greatest of these is—Faith !” And so men often boast themselves of their Faith, whose life and conversation are conspicuous for want of Love. Indeed this spurious Faith is even contrary to the Apostle’s Charity, and might almost be

made the subject of an opposition chapter. For *this* "faith" suffereth no whit, and is hard; this faith vaunteth itself and is puffed up. It behaveth itself unseemly, is selfish, is quick of provocation, and ready to think evil. Beareth nothing, believeth the worst; hopeth nothing, endureth nothing. It is a painted sun, without light or warmth; or as gay shavings in the grate, when shivering men seek a fire. Its might, or what seems its might, is naught: yea, tho' a man have all faith, so that he could remove mountains, and have not charity, he is nothing. This coinage has the King's stamp on it; but it is base metal: it will not pass current in Heaven. It wants the ring of the true gold. Faith without Love "profiteth nothing."

—But how is this? Do we speak slightly, unkindly of Faith; disparagingly of one of the Three Christian Graces? No, surely no! Not disparagingly of the Angel, Faith, with the light of Heaven caught in her seraphic eyes. Not of Faith the Angel, but of the loveless Demon, clothed in the stolen raiment of that Angel of light. Let Faith, Hope, Charity, group together in the sculpture of God's ever-building Temple. Take Faith and Hope from Love, and Love must pine and die. But Faith and Hope both draw their life from Love. Hope would perish, "the world would kill her soon," if Faith sustained her not. And Faith is dead, and

Hope is lost, directly Love is gone. But Faith shall one day be lost in sight, yet only as stars are seen no longer when the sun shines. And Hope shall ever be passing into fulfilment and possession. But Love abideth eternally the same. And, in his judgment between the three, St. Paul allots the golden apple to Love. Yet her sister-angels are not jealous. "Now abideth Faith, Hope, Charity, these three; but the greatest of these is Charity."

This fair flower of Love is, you see, twined by the Church about the Porch of Lent. The wonderful chapter of Love is set before us as the key note, as it were, of all our Lent-learning. Lessons of Faith we are to learn: lessons of self-denial taught by Faith, which guides our thought beyond the seen to the unseen, bidding us mourn now, that we may rejoice hereafter. Lessons of Hope, too, we are to learn in Lent; for even the tears of our exile point forward to the promise of our restoration; and the gloom of our dungeon reminds us that we are "prisoners of Hope." Prisoners, yet with the Key of Promise in our bosom, which shall open all the locks of Doubting Castle, and defy all the threatenings of Giant Despair. But nothing at all of value shall we have learnt in Lent, if we shall not have learned in it, *Lessons of Love*.

Let us dwell more particularly on this matter. Let us go back to our sadder thought of the "rarity of Christian Charity, under the sun."—Is it not beautiful? Is it not powerful? *Is it not rare?*

Let us take, first, the general subject of—Church Questions of the present day. Let us look at our unhappy divisions; at the schisms from the Church,—the sects outside the Church;—and, also at the differences within the Church itself.

Now we cannot make all men think alike; and although we deplore that there should be those who have left the Church of their forefathers, the Church built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, of which JESUS CHRIST is the chief corner stone, yet we own readily that, however mistakenly, such separatists have, in many cases, acted sincerely and conscientiously. And, although we desire that, within the Church, her members would unite in holding the whole truth, and not first break it into fragments, and then fight for one special fragment of the inheritance, Gospel and Apostolic, once delivered to the saints, yet we perceive that, in the present imperfect state of things, these differences of opinion must exist. We cannot help it; sects severed from the Church there will be: and divisions within the Church herself. These things cannot be prevented, here and now: we must endure what we cannot cure.

But *one* thing there is which *can* be cured ; and which assuredly ought not to be endured. And that is, the bitterness, the wrath, the envy, the impatience, the malice, the uncharitableness, which disgraces our common, if disunited, Christianity. Error we may hate, but we might be tender to the erring. Truth we must declare, but we might “ speak the Truth in love.” Indeed the Church is far from guiltless here, in her treatment of her estranged children. Has there not often been harshness and bitterness, arrogance and contempt, on the part of the Mother towards her revolted offspring ? Thank GOD, better thoughts are with us now, and “ Home reunion ” is sighed for, together with the yearning for restored communion with estranged branches of CHRIST’S Church abroad. Back into the old paths our Church invites both the separated at home and the estranged abroad to go, seeking, with tears, for this lost gem Unity ; and entreats that, in the search, already, hands may link in love. Yet too many angry hearts and bitter spirits, are there in the Church herself : and those whose hearts are growing tender to those without, are, too often, hard and cruel to brethren within, holding aloof from them as though aliens. And sects severed from the Church, how bitter is their enmity often towards her ! though there be honourable exceptions. And most for their Creed ; and few for CHRIST ;—this is the spectacle at which angels wonder, at which loving hearts weep. *Our Creed, or Christ ;*

for which, let each ask, are we contending? Can that zeal be for the Lord of Love, which is marked by bitterness and rancour? Can hate and pride really be advancing the Banner of the Cross? Is it not their Creed, for which most men are warring, and not their Lord? In our unhappy divisions, in our unavoidable differences, is there not, even with us all, much need of close study in the school of Christian love?

And at home in the separate and several relations of our daily life, is not this "Charity" of the Apostle's praise a thing most rare, a height towards which we have diligently and painfully to climb? The Charity which suffereth long, and is kind: which is not easily provoked: thinketh no evil: is this thing common among Christians? Have we not all much to learn at the feet of this Apostle? What a common thing among us is Censoriousness; I mean the readiness to find fault; to pick holes in the fair fabric of the lives of those about us; to thrust the hand into any rent or thin place in their robe, and to exaggerate the fault or flaw. For which is our eye most busy, and which does it most quickly detect, the possible good or the possible evil in those about us; in their motives, in their words, in their acts? Concerning which is our tongue most glib; concerning that which is hopeful in them, or concerning that which betrays fault, failing, weakness? The very

word, "*prejudice*" has a lesson for us. It only means "Judgment beforehand," which might be hopeful just as well as unfavourable. But the word has come to have only the bad sense, because our fore-judgments are almost sure to be uncharitable. The Charity which beareth all things is rare : the Charity which endureth all things is seldom found : the Charity which believeth all good of another : the Charity which ever hopeth for the best : this Charity is the rarest of all. And an eye quick to find out faults, this is common enough ; and an eye ever watching to perceive some excellency, this is indeed seldom found.

I have read an old legend which is to the point.

Outside the gates of a city of Judæa, they say, a dead dog was cast. Unclean, ignoble animals, at the best, are dogs that roam the Eastern cities for offal and garbage. And this was a dead carcass, cast out, lying by the roadside. A group of passers by assembled about it presently. "What does this stinking carcass here?" said one. "It is an unclean beast, dead, as living," said another. "Hideous when alive and foul when dead," exclaimed a third. "Doubtless it was hung for stealing," cried a fourth. But a grave Stranger, with kind compassionate eyes had stood by, beholding and listening. He, too, drew

near and looked at the despised carcase. "*Pearls are not whiter than his teeth*;" he said, and passed on.

Then a whisper arose and passed through the crowd; "This must be JESUS of Nazareth: none other but He could find aught to praise in a dead dog!"

Is there not a lesson for us to learn in this old legend? Something to praise and love, shall we watch for that in each other; and not always rather something to blame and dislike?

May not, then, this divine chapter of the praise of love, be laid much to our heart, now, on Lent's threshold; and throughout Lent's shadow, and afterwards, when we pass into the Easter sunshine? Might it not be taken, verse for verse, as a subject for special Self-examination during Lent? Without Love we have nothing, and are nothing. And now abideth Faith, Hope, Charity; these three. But the greatest of these is Charity.

Dear Friends, Hate is noisy among us, but Love is quiet. It is the "still small voice" in which GOD is, —Who is not in the Whirlwind; not in the Earthquake; not in the Fire. And shall not we rejoice

on this your Festal day, beholding, in some degree, at least, the effects of five years' pleading of this still small voice among you. Let us own, and thank God for it, that this five years' work in your midst is a work which the devil hates, and which God loves. With sweet powerful persuasion the Gospel of Charity has drawn, first one, then the other, into its vortex ; here one or two singly ; here five or six together. Much has been done, by God's grace ; much for which those labouring in your midst may well thank God, and take courage. How much yet remains to be done, you know better than I ; and God knows better than all. Yet think what *may* be, by God's grace, attained in five years more ; since such a beginning invites and urges to press on still. Let each who has here learned to care for Gospel privileges, say, to others yet out in the cold, "Come !" Yes, "let him that heareth say Come ! And let him that is athirst, Come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

But it is of no use inviting with your lips and repelling with your lives. Win others to the true Catholic Faith ; to the one safe Hope, by means of the sweet persuasion of Love. Contend for Christian Faith : hold fast Christian Hope. But in your work and your suffering, in all you say and think and do, remember that, though all three abide,

"THE GREATEST OF THESE IS CHARITY."