

A

Sermon

PREACHED IN

CHRIST'S CHURCH, MONTREAL,

ON FRIDAY, THE 4TH MAY, 1832.

BEING THE DAY APPOINTED FOR A

PUBLIC FAST,

Occasioned by the apprehension of being

VISITED BY THE PESTILENCE

WHICH IS SCOURGING THE NATIONS OF EUROPE.



BY THE

Rev. JOHN BETHUNE, Rector.



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TO THE
Members of the Congregation of
CHRIST'S CHURCH.



My dearly beloved Parishioners,

AMONG the many great and responsible duties of a Minister to his people, none can be more imperative than that of warning them against the neglect of God's judgments.— Deeply impressed with this conviction, I take the liberty of offering you a copy of the Sermon which I preached on the occasion of the late Public Fast. I trust it will be received, with all its imperfections, in the same spirit in which it is offered. And I pray God it may prove the humble means, with His blessing, of inducing you, under the awful apprehension of the visitation with which we are threatened, to follow *that wisdom which the Holy Ghost teacheth*, as affording the most effectual protection against all calamity; enabling you, under its pressure, if it should please the Almighty Disposer of all things to visit us with *the pestilence*, to receive the infliction with meekness and resignation to His will, as the *chastening of Him who loveth you*, and to say, with sincerity,—*It is good for me that I have been afflicted.*

I am,

My dear Parishioners,

Your faithful and affectionate

Pastor and Friend,

JOHN BETHUNE.

Montreal, 18th May, 1832.

Sermon, &c.

Jeremiah v. c. 9."—" *Shall I not visit for these things saith the Lord; and shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this.*"

THE whole volume of the sacred Scriptures of the Old Testament abounds with examples of the punishment of nations and people for their wickedness, by means of the sword, the famine, or the pestilence. And why should we not suppose that nations are still subject to the like visitations of Providence? The Providence of God is universal; if it be exerted with regard to individuals, it must also extend to public bodies.—Nor has it any limitation as to time. If the nations' of antiquity were subject to its controul, so also must the nations of modern times, and of all times, until the end of time. Accordingly we find that nations have, in all ages of the world, considered themselves as visited with calamity on account of their iniquities; and the calamities have also been of a like nature, viz. war, famine, or pestilence. And not only the general cause has been the same, but the particular crying sin—the forsaking of God, and the substitution of idolatrous worship, whether open or secret, or whether it be of false God's or of idols which have engrossed a greater share of the desires of men's

hearts than the only one true God,—this has been the cause of God's judgements.

The Prophet Ezekiel is instructed to say unto the Elders of Israël : “ thus saith the Lord God ; every man of the house of Israel that setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to the prophet ; I the Lord will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols ; that I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are allestranged from me through their idols.” Then the prophet is instructed to say that “ unless they repented and turned themselves from their idols,” he would visit them with the “ sword, the famine, or the pestilence.” And have we not seen or read of these engines of God's wrath, either separately or in their united strength, desolating the nations of the earth in all ages of the world ? Have we not seen a remarkable instance, in the last century, of the infliction of the judgment of the sword upon a nation which had openly cast off the worship of the true God ?—nay do we not now see, in this our own day, the judgment of the pestilence stalking from one extremity of the world to the other ? Yes ! we see the calamity, but we do not perhaps look upon it as the visitation of Providence for the sins of the nations ! A little enquiry, a little reflection, however, may perhaps convince us.

The nature and the effect of the pestilence itself are sufficient to stamp it with the appearance of a

scourge sent from God. The very air which man must breathe has been infected by its poisonous emanations ;—the winds of heaven have wafted them from city to city, and from country to country. No barrier, not even the ocean itself, has been able to resist its progress. It has been affected by no variety of climate, no change of season! It has travelled with appalling speed over the torrid and the temperate zones—it has passed through summer and winter, seed time and harvest, with equal rapidity, and with equal desolation. The utmost exertions of man ;—the wisest, the most salutary, the most vigilant precautions have proved ineffectual to arrest its course ; and the skill of the Physician to discover its antidote has been baffled in every country. These circumstances are surely sufficient, of themselves, to induce us to consider this pestilence as a scourge sent from our heavenly Father to convince the nations that all is not right with them in the sight of God. And this conviction receives confirmation from the state of the world itself. What, let any one ask himself, has been the growing principle by which the affairs of the nations, calling themselves Christian, have, for some years past, been governed ? Has there not been an increasing, uneasy desire among men to divest their minds of what they are daily labouring to convince themselves is an unnecessary, irksome restraint, fit only to be borne by the ignorant or the bigotted—the scriptural principles of “Fearing God, and honouring the King,” and of “submitting to the

powers that be as ordained of God?" Is it not the prevailing desire—nay, is it not becoming daily more and more fashionable; is it not even considered the characteristic of a liberal, enlightened mind, to *laugh even to scorn* at the idea, that those who are appointed to "bear rule over us", are to be looked upon as the "Ministers of God, who are to watch over us for good," or to spurn, as the dream of fanaticism, or the invention of designing cant and hypocrisy, the notion that the counsels of nations should be governed, like the counsels of individuals, by the great principles of the Gospel of Christ?—And has not, consequently, the one God of Heaven and earth, He who is *Governor among the nations*, been dethroned by those idols of licentious liberty, of unrestrained self-will, of freedom from all salutary control—nay, from all religious restraint, which men have been setting up in their hearts, saying,—“by the strength of my hand have I done it,” and “by my wisdom have I done it, for I am prudent?” “Ah sinful nations, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil doers, children that are corrupters,—they have forsaken the Lord—they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they have gone away backward.” And shall not the Lord *visit for these things, and shall not his soul be avenged upon such a people as this?*

There can be no stronger testimony of the corruption and perverseness of men's hearts, or of the habitual absence of God from their minds, or of the little dependence they are accustomed to place in the

strength of his arm, or of their want of confidence in the shelter of his wing, than the means to which they resort under the first impulse of the alarm occasioned by such a visitation as that which now forces itself upon the serious consideration of even the most thoughtless or careless observer.— Human means, human ingenuity, or human skill are almost invariably the first things thought of ;— trust in the wisdom of man, or in the strength of the arm of flesh is that which rises most naturally and most powerfully in the human heart. The thought of God is only forced upon us when all other means have failed ; and then, alas ! it frequently comes too late. Now although the means I have spoken of are not to be thrown out of our regards, yet they are to be used in subserviency, or as auxiliaries to trust in God,—as the instruments of His Providence, which, like all his other instruments, can be of no avail without his blessing.

But who can confidently resort to that trust in God to which his blessing is promised ? None assuredly but those whom God is pleased, through the merits of his blessed son, to account righteous in his sight. The Scriptures inform us that “ the prayer of the righteous availeth much ” ; that “ the prayer of the upright is his delight,” and that “ he heareth the prayer of the righteous.” But “ he that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination.” That “ the counsel of the wicked is far from him ;” that “ he preserveth not the life of the wicked ;” “ that the sacrifice

of the wicked is an abomination." And the Prophet Ezekiel distinctly tells the Jews "that God answereth the wicked according to their own heart,"^b nay, that he would even *permit Prophets to be deceived, in order to deceive the people*, as a just judgment upon them for their infidelity; and "that when the inhabitants of a land have filled up the measure of their iniquities, and God ariseth to execute judgment upon them, the few righteous that are left among them shall not be able, by their prayers and intercessions, to deliver the nation from the judgment decreed against it,—they shall deliver but their own souls."* Such also was the case of Sodom, where there were none righteous but Lot and his family, and where none but themselves were saved. There is indeed always a time of mercy when the righteousness of one, or of a few, may reprieve a whole nation from destruction, yet when the appointed time for the execution of God's judgment is come, though three such men as Noah, Daniel and Job should be found in it, they should only be able to *deliver their own souls*.

From all this, however, may be derived the consoling assurance that when the judgments of God are abroad in the world, 'the righteous shall be enabled to deliver their own souls'—that is, that all those who have not forsaken the law of God; who have not set their hearts upon those idols of the world which too often usurp there the love of God, and of his laws, and which have drawn down upon the nations his judgments, shall escape. But the promise is not

* Lowth.

only made to all these, but to all such as shall, by means of the judgment, be brought to repentance ; to all such as shall *turn themselves from their idols, and shall turn away their faces from all their abominations.*

Whatever therefore may be our national sins, does it not become every person under the apprehension of that judgment of God which is now abroad in the world, seriously to consider what share his own individual sins may have had in calling down this visitation ? And does it not consequently become us carefully to examine our hearts, that we may thereby be enabled, by timely repentance, to avert the effects of the visitation, as far as we are individually concerned ? Or, at least, that by preparing our minds to receive it as the chastisement of God, we may be among the number of those to whom may be applied the declaration, that “ the Lord loveth whom he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth ? ” We have already seen that the judgments of God denounced by the Prophets of old were occasioned by the sins of idolatry and rebellion. How far then have we been individually guilty of the same sins, either openly in our own conduct, or secretly in our hearts ? It will scarcely be necessary to remark that, in a Christian land, none can be guilty of the sin of idolatry, in precisely the same manner as the Jews were of old, by transferring their external acts of Worship from the Supreme Governor of the Universe, to senseless and inanimate objects ;—but the devotion of the heart may

have been more warmly engaged in the service of *the things of this world*, than in the service of God.

Let it be our business seriously to enquire into this matter. And first, with regard to external acts:—Is your attendance in the House of God as regular and devoted as your attendance to the ordinary business of life? Are you as anxious to assemble together, to acknowledge his goodness, to adore his sovereign power and mercy, and to pour out your hearts before him in praise and thanksgiving, as you are to assemble together for promoting your worldly interests, or for gratifying your appetite for amusement or pleasure?—And do you show forth that anxiety by your conduct? Or do you rather suffer some such frivolous excuse to interfere as, in the neglect of your worldly business would be looked upon by all men as an unerring indication of that careless indifference, of that idleness, or of that apathetic inattention to business, which must have the effect of destroying all confidence and all trust in your stability? Or are you guilty of this neglect, even at the expence of desecrating God's holy day, and of violating without scruple, the command to hallow His Sabbaths, under the pretence of a press of worldly business, which a few hours occasionally snatched away from some favourite pastime, would enable you to remove—or, at all events, which a less eager desire to enrich yourselves with the superabundant things of this life, or to gain the applause of men, would render unnecessary? Or do you allow your attendance here to be influenced by the

unhallowed motives of pride, prejudice, favouritism or fashion ? In a word, does your neglect of the worship of God in his holy temple, prove that you are less governed by the love of Him, than by the love of yourselves—than by the love of your own ease, comfort or convenience ; or by the love of any of those pursuits, or feelings, or prejudices, or gratifications of any description, in which an undue indulgence, or on which the fixing your heart and affections, must be incompatible with the full discharge of this your most *reasonable service* ? And then, with regard to those ordinances which, as a part of public worship, are the test, in some degree at least, of our religious sincerity—i. e. so far as the human eye can penetrate ;—with regard to them, what has been your conduct ? Of one thing at least, we are certain, with regard to the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, that they who have never partaken of it, have not yet determined to give up their vices or their pleasures, or whatever else may be standing in the way, for their Saviour.

With regard then to this ordinance—have you hitherto neglected it ? If you have, it must be because you have hitherto felt a greater regard for something else, which you have considered incompatible with its observance. Or have you, as an occasional guest at the Lord's table, ever had occasion to weigh in the opposite scales of the balance, the performance of this duty, and some favourite pursuit or pleasure, and suffered the latter to preponderate—then, in that instance, deliberately selling

your love of Christ for a momentary sinful gratification? You must have thought it sinful, or you would not have separated it from your duty. Or have you rather, when the incompatibility of such gratifications with the full, and constant and acceptable discharge of your duty to God, has created in your mind the slightest shade of doubt, have you, in such a case, unhesitatingly, and at once, torn the doubt from your mind, even if it cost you as much pain as tearing out an eye, or cutting off a limb; by offering up the cause of the doubt, *a burnt sacrifice, a sweet smelling savour unto God?*

If your hearts have been in the house of God and in his service, there has *your treasure been also*, and there have you been found *seeking for it*. But if they have been set on the perishing things of time, —there has your treasure been also, and there have you been seeking for it. If your treasure has been discovered to be hidden in the field of God's love, then have you disposed of all that you have, all your attachments to the vanities of life, to purchase that field; then have you resolved to sacrifice, at once, every other consideration that can interfere with your *security* in its acquisition. But if your hearts have been set upon finding your hidden treasure in the field of worldly acquisitions, or pleasures, then have you been found seeking for it in that field, and then have you not scrupled to sacrifice God and his worship—your obedience to his commands—all that you have, or hope to have in Him—for the purchase of that

field. In which of these fields is your treasure hidden ? Consult your own hearts, and you cannot be at a loss for a reply,—and the reply will also tell you, whether you are Idolaters, or worshippers of the true God.

And next, with regard to the thoughts of the heart, or the ruling passions of the mind.—Has the ambition to gain distinction among men, whether by the fame of wealth, talents or influence, or even of distinguished piety, or of extraordinary zeal for the service of God and for his glory, and for the advancement of his kingdom on earth ;—has this ambition been the moving spring of your conduct ? has it taken such possession of your heart that the love of God, the pure desire of doing his will, because it is his will, holds but a secondary place there ? Do you think less of the duty you owe to God, than of your worldly interests ? Are you less concerned about the performance of the former than of the latter ? or about pleasing God than man ? In a word, do you make your service to God subservient to the advancement of your temporal welfare—instead of regulating your whole conduct by the principles of the Gospel of Christ, which were given to us for that purpose ?—The answers to these, and such questions as these, will leave you at no loss to determine where your most anxious hopes and desires are fixed—where your treasure is, and consequently where is the worship of your hearts, and consequently too, whether you are, or are not, in this sense, guilty of the sin of Idolatry.

If any of you, my brethren, after such an examination into your own hearts, and I trust that none will so little regard their own highest interest as to neglect it,—If any of you should unhappily find that the world, and not *the Lord* has hitherto been *your God*—that the worship of your hearts has been more earnestly set upon the things of time than of eternity, and that the ruling principles of your conduct have not been carefully regulated by the standard of the Gospel, but by the standard of other men ;—it is time to begin to think of breaking away from such bonds of miserable servitude. It is time to consider whether this judgment of God which is now abroad in the earth be intended to overtake you individually, and whether you should not seek the only means of averting it by *turning unto the Lord with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping and with mourning*. It is time to bethink yourselves that there is an abundant store of mercy for the repentant sinner ; that “ if the wicked man will forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and will return unto the Lord, he will have mercy upon him, and will abundantly pardon him.”

This forsaking of the ways and the thoughts of the wicked, and returning unto the ways of God, following his commandments ;—this sacrificing, on the altar of Christianity, of all the evil propensities of the human heart,—this coming out from a *state of sin and wickedness*, and entering, through the blood of Christ, *into the glorious liberty of the Sons of God*, constitutes so great a change in our thoughts,

words and actions, that it is called in Scripture, the *new birth*—the *new creature* which every man becomes when he is truly and sincerely a follower of Christ. But this can only be acquired through faith, or firm, undoubting persuasion that these things are so ; not that belief which *the devil's have, and tremble*, but that belief which leads men to act according to its dictates—by availing themselves of all its promises and its privileges, with all the eager earnestness of the woman in the Gospel, whose unceasing importunities extorted from the unjust Judge what was denied to her simple request. Let every one then seek, with honest, uncompromising sincerity, that first fruit of faith—that spiritual birth which alone can give *the victory over the world*—which fills the heart with the love of God and his laws—and the soul with those solid spiritual joys—with that consciousness of security under the panoply of God's protecting power, which can only spring from a fountain so pure and so blessed—gently conveying its purifying streams into all the channels of our necessary worldly business—washing away the defilements of earthly contact—and leaving the uncontaminated mind free to perceive and joyfully to acknowledge, in all things, the hand of the bountiful *giver of every good and perfect gift*.

May the God of all mercy and peace give you grace, so to seek and so to find, that in the *midst of his judgments*, you shall be among the happy number of those who will be enabled joyfully to exclaim *He hath remembered mercy*.

PRAYERS

ORDERED TO BE USED IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS IN THE DIOCESE OF QUEBEC, UNDER THE PREVAILING APPREHENSION OF PESTILENCE.

At Morning Prayer.

Most gracious Father and God who hast promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto Thee, look down, we beseech Thee, from Heaven Thy dwelling place, upon us Thy unworthy Servants, who, under an awful apprehension of Thy judgments, and a deep conviction of our sinfulness, prostrate ourselves before Thee.— We acknowledge it to be of Thy goodness alone, that whilst Thou hast visited other nations with pestilence, Thou hast so long spared us. Have pity, O Lord, have pity on Thy people both here and abroad: withdraw Thy heavy hand from those who are suffering under Thy judgments, and turn away from us that grievous calamity, against which our only security is in Thy compassion. We confess with shame and contrition, that, in the pride and hardness of our hearts, we have shewn ourselves unthankful for Thy mercies, and have followed our own imaginations instead of Thy holy laws. Yet, O merciful Father, suffer not Thy destroying Angel to lift up his hand against us, but keep us, as Thou hast heretofore done, in health and safety: and grant that, being warned by the sufferings of others to repent of our own sins, we may be preserved from all evil by Thy mighty protection, and enjoy the continuance of Thy mercy and grace, through the merits of our only Mediator and Advocate Jesus Christ. AMEN.

At Evening Prayer.

O Almighty God, who by the many instances of mortality which encompass us on every side, dost call upon us seriously to consider the shortness of our time here upon earth, and remindest us that in the midst of life we are in death, so teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. Give us grace to turn unto thee with timely repentance, and thus to obtain, through the merits of our Saviour, that pardon to-day, which to-morrow it may be too late to seek for; that so being strengthened by Thy good Spirit against the terrors of death, and daily advancing in godliness, we may at all times be ready to give up our souls into Thy hands, O gracious Father, in the hope of a blessed immortality, through the mediation, and for the merits, of Jesus Christ our Lord.— AMEN.