

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH.

A SERMON PREACHED BY REV. J. S. BLACK, NOVEMBER 7TH, 1880.

"One in Christ Jesus."—Gal. iii. 28.

The Greek, Roman, Episcopal and Presbyterian communions all claim to be catholic in their spirit and constitution. The Methodist, Congregational and Baptist Churches are not separate communions so far as the question of a broader catholicity is concerned. Methodism is separated from Episcopacy by differences in polity and government, and not by creed. Congregationalism is at one with Presbyterianism in doctrine, and the difference in the form of government makes but a thin wall of partition between them. The Baptist Church is Congregational in its polity, and is separated by its position with regard to the subject and mode of baptism.

Many minor divisions have existed, and do yet exist in those several denominations, but these divisions have been in part healed, notably in the Presbyterian and Methodist communions, and the signs of the times are that the days of healing are not ended. To many students of Church history it is only a question of time when the great Methodist Church will be able once more to become one with that grand historic Church, out of the very heart of which she sprang to do a blessed and God-appointed work. Nearer and simpler still is the prospective union of Presbyterians and Congregationalists, while, by-and-by, we shall become wise enough either to be one on the question of baptism, or more probably, we shall agree to differ and yet be in the same family. But supposing the good time were come when these minor divisions should have become matters of history, the four great divisions, Roman, Greek, Episcopal and Presbyterian still remain. Can these several members of the body of Christ ever be united? They have been growing apart for centuries. Their separation in doctrine and in polity is in many respects radical. Our hope is in the knowledge of this truth, that with God all things are possible.

EVILS OF DISUNION.

The present position of the visible Churches of Christ is not one of unmixed evil. They are good, but not the highest form of good. Our Lord's prayer for the oneness of His own is not answered in them. Optimist views of the situation are natural to generous minds, especially on occasions of interdenominational comity, such as the "week of prayer," and the meetings of the Evangelical Alliance. The denominations are compared to the different arms of the military service, each one fighting in its own way, but all for the same good cause and under the same commander-in-chief. They are pilgrims sailing in ships of different rigging and build, but all bound for the same port. Let me quote the words of an eloquent optimist, "There are minor differences, but yet there is real unity." Ours is not a unity like that of the waters of a stagnant pool, over which the purifying breath of heaven sweeps in vain. Ours is not the unity of darkness, like the cloud-covered midnight sky, where neither moon nor star appears. Ours is not a unity of forced conformity, such as is found in polar seas, where eternal winter has locked up the waves in fetters; but rather, the union of Evangelical Protestants is like the fountain flowing ever fresh and free from the rock, like the rainbow that combines the seven prismatic colours into one glorious arch of promise, spanning the heavens; the old ocean's unfettered flow as its waves rush in all their majesty and might, distinct as the billows but one as the sea."

You observe that when the beauties of the existing state of things are to be unfolded, a convenient refuge is found in tropical speech. This is very excellent for rhetorical purposes, but not very convincing in argument. Many take their stand on the general issue of human nature, and their usual formula for commencing the apologetic utterance is, "as human nature is at present constituted."

If the present constitution of human nature is wrong in this or in anything else, it is the office of the truth to find a remedy for the wrong, not to take refuge behind it. There are others who confuse the notions of union and uniformity, and when they have proved that uniformity is neither possible nor desirable, they fondly imagine that they have made a plea for the existing divisions. Apart altogether from the question

as to the degree of uniformity which is desirable, it is patent to everyone familiar with the Churches of today that there is no lack of liberty and ample scope for individuality, and any united Church of the future would certainly not curtail this liberty.

We do not need the aid of any figures of speech in relating the evils of the present state of things. There is

I. Waste. In this city we have overdone church-building, just as we have overdone banking and certain kinds of business, and if our churches have not gone to the wall (and some of them have had a very narrow escape), like mercantile concerns in these trying years, so much the more to the credit of the energy and thrift of the Christian men who manage their secular affairs, and also to the credit of the zeal of those who, whether ministers or office-bearers, have had to do with the spiritual side of the Church life; but the fact remains that we are over-churched, and while the heathen, for whom we pray, have not one church to a hundred thousand souls, we have one to every seven or eight hundred inhabitants who are professedly Protestant. But we must go into our smaller towns and villages if we would see waste reigning in the name of Christ. There are many townships and villages of from five hundred to a thousand inhabitants where two, three and sometimes four denominations are struggling for existence. We might have patience if the struggle were to result in the survival of the fittest, but the question of survival depends largely upon the support received from the home mission funds of their respective Churches. Granted, there is kindness in taking to those thinly settled districts that form of service which they have learned to prefer; granted that if we do not nurse the beginning of the feeble enterprises the strong Church would never grow up; is there no way in which the Home Mission Committees of the several Churches could meet and by friendly intercourse seek to prevent waste?

II. Jealousy and Illfeeling. You subject human nature to a good deal of a strain when you place four churches in a small town where one or two would afford ample accommodation for all the people. The grace of God does a great deal for men, but we cannot expect it never to fail us when we, with open eyes, lead ourselves into temptation. It is bad for the ministers in these localities, and it is worse for the people. It has come to this that certain districts gravely canvass the different denominations to find out which one will do most for them. Party strife is encouraged. I have met men who took credit to themselves for not going near the Methodist service, though there was no Presbyterian service in the neighbourhood. A minister in an Episcopal Synod lamented, in the presence of reporters, in a public speech, that a certain place, not a hundred miles from this city, was without the means of grace; well knowing that while there was no Episcopal church there, a Presbyterian and a Methodist church were there with a pastor in each.

III. There is weakness in missionary effort. "Our foreign missionaries have usually more sense than the home committees, from whom they receive their instructions. I do not mean more good sense in general, but more sense in this matter of union, and so they fraternize abroad in a way which we at home do not always appreciate. But even in the mission field there is waste of energy, and a fatal weakness in our divisions, for they are a stumblingblock to the heathen. We hear little about this in our missionary records. No one wants to confess it too much, but it is a fact nevertheless. In all this, my friends, I do not care to prove the Presbyterian Church to be either better or worse than her neighbours.

IV. There is the greatest evil of all, the prayer of our Lord unanswered. On the eve of His passion He prayed for the oneness of His own, and it has not come yet. The Holy Catholic Church has always been a reality because there is an invisible Church of the redeemed whose names are written in heaven. But the Holy Catholic Church can be what it has not been for fourteen centuries, a visible fact, and institution on earth. Our blessed Lord did not pray for the impossible.

The very divisions in Protestantism are evidences of its freedom and vitality. But a more mature freedom and a larger life would heal the divisions which, in their infancy they made.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES.

The reproach of this disunion is not suffered to be-

come silent. The Church of Rome, forgetting her own historic divisions and dissensions, tells us that the only way out of our difficulty is to return to the bosom of the true Church, that is herself. But then the Greek Church could, with equal force, extend a similar invitation, and the promise of unity becomes a fiction. Nevertheless, the superficial unity of the Roman Church has great weight as a popular argument, more especially as, in the west, many of us forget the very existence of that Oriental Church with which we never come in contact.

On the other hand we are attacked by the philosophers. By the "Index" and in other ways the Church of Rome fulminates against the sceptical philosophy of the day, whereas the Protestant Churches do not take much notice of them in an official way. The philosophers seem to resent this being let alone, or they dread the silence of Protestantism more than the denunciations of Rome, for it is their fashion to make their more bitter attacks on Protestantism. Mr. Huxley comes all the way to New York to have his little sneer at the Bible, and Mr. Harrison, the best known of living Positivists, with evident satisfaction, asks this question, "Nay, which is the Protestant Church amidst a thousand querulous sects?" This question introduces four or five paragraphs of virulent abuse; abuse so extravagant that it defeats itself; but the query is a pertinent one none the less.

Protestantism is feeling the disgrace of its divisions. The Evangelical Alliance, and the great representative gatherings which, for lack of a better name, we call Pan-Anglican, Pan-Presbyterian, and so forth, are evidences of this.

Three months ago the Archbishop of Canterbury in the visitation of his diocese delivered his usual charge to the clergy. These Episcopal charges have all the force of a manifesto, and the remarks made on this occasion by the highest dignitary of the Church are unusually significant. After speaking in kindly terms looking to union with Episcopal and non-Episcopal continental Churches, he thus continues:

THE NONCONFORMISTS.

"The boundaries of separation, then, between us and the Continental Protestants who hold fast by the fundamentals of the Gospel fade to an indistinct line; and shall we not, from our necessary connection with these, learn many lessons to guide us in our dealings with our Nonconforming brethren at home and their representatives in the United States of America? In fact, it will be our own fault if all the Protestant communities throughout the world, Episcopal and non-Episcopal, do not feel that their cause is indissolubly united with ours. At home, important questions of policy may keep us apart. Certainly it is our duty to resist all efforts for subverting the National constitution of our Church, which makes it the authorized teacher of all our people and the mouthpiece through which our common Christianity speaks in all our public acts as a State. Also, it is impossible to have a near union of worship and teaching with those who altogether repudiate our forms of prayer and of Church government, and look upon many of the statements made by our Church as superstitious and ungodly. But not the less is it our duty, where we can, to cultivate friendly relations with them and draw them to us by the manifestation of a real Christian spirit, while we look out for occasions in which, notwithstanding our differences, we may act together for the spiritual good of the nations. The Church of Christ throughout the world would, it must be remembered, be deprived of a large proportion of its worshippers if we left out of sight our Christian brotherhood, non-Episcopal congregations at home, and the overwhelming mass of such congregations in the United States of America. Thus, I trust, we English Churchmen are learning more and more to realize once again that great idea which was so powerful of old to stir men's hearts and make them help each other—that there is a vast community, cemented by their faith and principle, which, amid all national and other special differences, joins together the whole body of those who worship God in Christ."

Coming nearer home, at the meeting of the Episcopal Synod in this city in September last, the Rev. Canon Carmichael, so well and favourably known to most of us, preached the opening sermon. It was a most brilliant plea for union among the various Protestant denominations, and in closing he called upon the Episcopal Church to take the initiative in bringing about the oneness for which the Saviour prayed.

At a subsequent session of the Synod the following resolution was moved by Rev. J. Langtry and carried:

"That the Synod having regard to the needs of the mission field and the present aspect of the Christian world, cannot separate without expressing its strong conviction of the great dangers to which Christianity throughout the world is exposed by its unhappy divisions, and without inviting and entreating Christians everywhere to yearn and pray for the restoration of unity to the real Body of Christ. And further, this Synod hereby requests the several bishops of this ecclesiastical Province, either by themselves, or with such assistance as they may call to their aid, to press this subject upon the consideration of the various Christian bodies around us, and to invite communication on this subject, either with the individual members or representatives of