

PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

THE WILL OF THE FATHER.

"It is not the will of your father which is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." St. Matthew xvii. 14.

There are two thoughts brought before us here. The one is the will of God, the other is one of the objects of that will, that none of those whom Christ calls "little ones" should perish.

I would speak to you of the will of God, not as a mystery, but as a power. I do not ask you to enter on the speculation what the will of God is, whether it might also be justly named the law of the universe; whether it is absolute, acting independently of all conditions; whether a thing is right because God wills it, or whether God wills it because it is right. All these are profound mysteries on which I have no call to speak, and you, perhaps, would be but little disposed to listen.

No! I speak of the will of God as a power, acting upon men's hearts. We all need power from on high, and there is no power so mighty, whether to stir or to soothe the heart of man, as the thought of the will of God.

I say whether to stir or to soothe. Let me throw light on both these parts of its power by two anecdotes. Many of those whom I now address must at some time of their lives have made the journey to Paris. Some of them, in going or returning, will have spent a few quiet hours under the shadow of the cathedral of Amiens, one of the spots which more than most others recalls the past history of ancient France in what are called, sometimes in regret, sometimes in decision, the Ages of Faith. Close to the east end of that glorious cathedral, in the centre of a small open space, stands the statue of an orator, holding in his hand a crucifix, and speaking with impassioned voice and gesture. Below his feet, on the massive pedestal, are inscribed the words, *Dieu le veut. It is the will of God.*

Who, do you suppose, is this orator, and what is the historical event to which those words refer? The orator is Peter the Hermit, a native of Amiens, and the event is the first crusade. In the year 1094 a council was held at Clermont by Pope Urban II. He spoke to an audience already charged to fever heat by the fiery eloquence of Peter. It has been written by a sober, sometimes almost cold, historian, "Never, perhaps, did a single speech of man work such extraordinary and lasting results as that of Urban II. at the Council of Clermont. . . . The Pontiff could scarcely conclude his speech: he was interrupted by ill-suppressed murmurs of grief and indignation. At its close one loud and simultaneous cry broke forth: It is the will of God! It is the will of God!"

The thought of the will of God is, as I said, mighty to stir. It is also mighty to soothe. Fourteen years ago the aged Archbishop of Dublin lay on what proved to be his dying bed. He was a man, as many here must know, unmatched for keenness and hardness of intellect, for physical energy, and for sharpness of wit. He was on in his seventy-seventh year, suffering intense physical pain, and well knowing that this pain must follow him to the bitter end. "His uselessness," as he calls it, was the especial trial to his active spirit. "One day," writes his chaplain, "when I went to see him, on my entering his study he looked up, and said, with tears in his eyes, 'Have you ever preached a sermon on the text, 'Thy will be done?' 'How do you explain it?' When I replied, 'Just so,' he said, 'that is the meaning;' and added, in a voice choked with tears, 'But it is hard—very hard sometimes—to say it.'"

These two instances, so different in all else, are alike in this, that they make us think of the will of God. If they teach any lesson at all, they teach us that we may obey the will of God in suffering. There is a bond, not of mortal framing, which links together the enthusiasm of the crusader and the resignation of the dying. At this point the two extremes meet. Our greatest activity, our greatest feebleness, here come together under the eye of Him who is at once the Almighty, and the Father who doth not afflict willingly. Our energy and our weakness alike seem to say: "Follow the counsel of St. Paul: strive to learn the one lesson of life—that, in all your work and in all your trials, you may 'prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.'"

And let us not imagine, Christian friends, that it is easy to learn that lesson. The best of us learn it very slowly, and amid countless mistakes. The crusaders had not learned it, though they thought they had learned it, though they gave so magnificent a proof of its power, though thousands of them even died in the faith that they were fighting for the will of God.

We who look back on their splendid devotion, we who have learned more of the spirit of our Master, we can see that they mistook the Divine will. To turn Europe loose upon Asia, to unchain in the name of religion every fierce and vengeful passion, to make the streets of Jerusalem run knee-deep in blood to avenge the wrongs done to a crucified Saviour—this was an error, this was fanaticism, this was not the will of the Father in heaven, who willed not that any of His little ones should perish. This assuredly, though an act of passionate faith, was not "the good and acceptable and perfect will of God." For the curbing of ill-tempered zeal, for the "warning of vehement, high, and daring natures," who know what it is to hate sin, but know not yet what it is to love sinners, let us hear the terrible admission of the Christian historian, when recording the capture of Jerusalem by the first crusaders, those devoted champions of the supposed will of God. "No barbarian," he says, "no infidel, no Saracen, ever perpetrated such wanton and cold-blooded atrocities of cruelty as the wearers of the Cross of Christ, who, it is said, had fallen on their knees and burst into a pious hymn at the first view of the Holy City."

Christian brethren, let me tell you what this history says to ourselves. We want the crusading spirit without the

crusaders' mistakes. We want strong characters, strong loves, strong hatreds, strong resolutions. Above all, we want the conviction, *It is the will of God!* Without this conviction nothing great was ever done. Look at the lives of great men. You will see that their greatness is always due, when you pierce to the centre, to this conviction, graven on their inmost conscience, and transfused into their very life blood, *It is the will of God.* It is not their tact, or knowledge, or high breeding, or physical courage—no, nor even their moral courage—that has made them remove mountains of loathsome abuses, and hurl them into the sea of contemptuous forgetfulness. It has been their faith, their certain assurance that they were acting not for themselves, but for another; in a word, their conviction, *It is the will of God.* Before this conviction all smaller wills have gone down. All mere gentlemanly hesitations, and sham conventionalities, and anxieties not to go too far, and lookings back to see if any, and who, were following—all such doomed imbecilities have gone down like leaves before the hurricane. The strong men have stormed the kingdom of heaven. Or, in plain English, the right has been done and the evil has been exterminated by the faith of men who laughed to scorn their puny opponents, strong in that unfeigned, that uncompromising, nay at times that pitiless conviction, *It is the will of God.*

I have said above that it is not always easy to discern the will of God. But there is one object of the will of God which is seldom dark to the Christian eye. *God wills the rescue of weakness.* "It is not the will of your Father which is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."

Let us for the moment try to look upon the world with the eyes of Christ. He came to found a new kingdom. The one ambition was to be righteousness. The one law was to be love. Hard at best would be the struggle. His servants to keep faithful to their truth. Their own inward frailty would too often be taking up rebel arms. But besides this inherent frailty, He saw the world full of offences—full of obstacles of man's planting, full of things making it hard to walk upright, and only too easy to trip and fall. And as He thought of the many weak ones who would be kept from Him by these offences—kept from him while on their way to Him, stretching out weak hands to Him, calling to Him with feeble voices—His human heart swelled with pity and indignation. He denounced His most awful woe on all who should offend one of His little ones, and all this He based on the will of His heavenly Father, who willed not that one of them should perish.

Who, then, are the "little ones" of whom the Saviour speaks? Let history and human nature and our own experience give the answer. It is a solemn and a pathetic procession that passes before us. It is the company of the wronged, the oppressed, the neglected, the forgotten, the ignorant, the tempted, the corrupted, the fallen. No nation is unrepresented in that obscure army of unrecognized martyrs. Men are there, and women in cruel numbers, and little children. If the question be addressed to the history of the Christian Church, who have been our "little ones?" one age would reply, "The victims of the imperial persecutions;" and another, "The Allagenses that were massacred by Innocent III.;" and another, "The countless victims, Christian and Jewish, of the Spanish Inquisition." These venerable wells, and the walls of our great metropolitan cathedral, are sacred with the memories of men who would all have a voice in defining Christ's "little ones." Howard would reply, "The hapless dwellers in our gaols." Wilberforce would reply, "The West Indian slaves." Dickens would reply, "The poor children in the workhouse." Burke, whose dust lies at his own home, would say, "The millions of India." Many now would say, "The millions of Bulgaria." Others, who know something of the work that has been done by the best men and women of England during the forty years of this eventful reign, will carry back their thoughts to the factory and to the mine, and to the agricultural gang, and to the dark chimney, and to the ragged school, and to the training ship, and to the reformatory, and to the penitentiary and to the migration to Canada. To such persons the mere allusions to these well-known names will summon up troop after troop of Christ's "little ones" all of whom were ready to perish, some of whom have been plucked from the depths of ruin, not by chance, not by an enlightened regard for self-interest, nor by abstract pity for suffering, nor even by the sacred passion of patriotism, but by Christian zeal and Christian devotion of minds haunted by the declaration of their Master, that it was not the will of His Father and theirs that one of His little ones should perish.

And do not imagine Christian friends, that what was with these good men and women an instinct, is one of the primary instincts of human nature. It is not so. The primary instinct of human nature is to let weakness be sacrificed. In our days of civilized Paganism, if a new-born child seemed weakly, it was exposed to die. As slaves we know what were the instincts of civilized Paganism as interpreted by some of the most exalted intellects that the world has ever seen. And even now it is the priest and the Levite who represent but too faithfully the primary instinct of humanity, which takes suffering and degradation for granted, assumes that there must be waste and ruin, casts upon the fallen an eye of criticism more or less curious, more or less indifferent, and then, with some common-place on the law of averages or the struggle for existence, "passes by on the other side."

"It must needs be that offences come." The weak and the unsuspecting must trip, and must fall. So far the spirit of Christ is in agreement with the spirit of the world. Each uses the same words, but with how different a feeling, and with what different deductions. The common-place man of the world says it with a shrug of the shoulder, as a conclusive reason for leaving matters as they are, for leaving nations to their fate, men to their fate, weak women to their fate, even little children to their fate. In Western Europe there is no such fatalistic cold-hearted man of the world, entrenched behind the statistics of degradation. The thing must be. There must be waste in the human world as in the world of nature. "Of

fifty seeds," so the poet reminds us, nature "brings but one to bear." The general who has to cross a great river in the face of the enemy, makes up his mind beforehand to sacrifice twenty thousand, perhaps thirty thousand, of his soldiers. That is the tribute which ambition pays to waste. There are inferior races and lower classes, and insignificant members in each race and class, and it is by their necessary, if not voluntary, abasement that the power, the leisure, the refinement, nay, even the purity of the upper is preserved and transmitted. Let us not, then, be too much shocked by "offences." Peace to the world because of offences, for it must needs be that that offences come.

So speaks, or thinks, the spirit of the world. But, oh! how different the tone of the spirit of Jesus Christ. There is one occasion, only one, recorded on which Jesus rejoiced in spirit. It was at the thought that things hidden from the wise and prudent had been revealed by the common Father unto babes. Does not this joy of the Saviour—may I venture to say, without irreverence, this chivalrous joy?—help us to measure the anguish with which that opposite reference to weakness fell from His lips! "Woe unto the world because of offences, for it must needs be that offences come.

It is not the will of your Father which is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Where the world sees necessary waste, Jesus sees the material for rescue. Where the world sees the law of the average, Jesus sees the will of the Father. The world sees bodies, instruments, servitude: Jesus sees souls, personal responsibility, the glorious liberty of the children of God. The world reposes in torpid acquiescence: Jesus is fired by a holy impatience. The world says "Veni vici." No hope for the mass of the miserable ones; Jesus says, "See that ye despise not one of these little ones."

O my brethren, are these merely rhetorical contrasts—a trick of words that die, and die deservedly as soon as they are uttered—or do they show us, show our consciences, our resolutions, our ambitions—show us here and show us now—two ways of looking upon human life? I will not ask you which is the more excellent way? On that we are agreed. Rather I will ask you, is the more excellent way still possible? Can a life be laid and built, like a goodly vessel, upon those lines—a life that may be launched with honour, and reach at last a heavenly haven?

Are there no "little ones" now to be cared for, no "offences" to be removed, is there no slavery to be abolished?

Just seventy years ago, when, by a glorious and memorable majority of 233 to 16, the House of Commons decided that the Slave Trade should die, the friends of Wilberforce crowded to his house in Palace Yard to wish him joy of this long-deferred triumph. He replied joyfully to one of them, "Well, what shall we abolish next?" Since that day there has been much to abolish in England; many a house of bondage then unsuspected, many an "offence" in the path of Christ's "little ones." And who shall say that the task is now complete, and that the will of the heavenly Father has been at last accomplished? The "offences" which cause ruin may be less flagrant than of old; their action may be more subtle, the means for removing them may also be more subtle, and leave a less conspicuous mark on history; but they are none the less real. Christ's "little ones," if only we have open Christ-like eyes, we have always with us—in our country, in our parish, in the circle of our friends, perhaps in our family.

Do I address any to-night who are undecided as to their life's career? Are there any men—any young men—who are not satisfied with living for themselves? Are there any women, who, with leisure on their hands, find the life of society tame and flat, and long for the stir of some Christian campaign? Can I do wrong in suggesting to you, as your call to newness of life, the old cry of the crusaders, *It is the will of God*, only tempering that cry by the gracious and tender interpretation of it, *It is the will of God that not one of His little ones should perish?* If the Spirit of God, who alone can inspire any fasting devotion, can stamp this conviction deep in the heart of any here present, then will be proved once more the truth, the abiding truth, of the Saviour's promise, *My words shall not pass away.*

It is on His words that we have been dwelling. We have tried to catch their spirit. We have tried, not so much to prove, as to make it felt, that they are still living. We have shown that illustrious lives have been lived in the faith of them, and farous causes fought and won in their name. And now we say here to one and another, aiming our shaft at a venture, but believing that among so many it will somewhere hit, "Go and do thou likewise." Search out for some of Christ's "little ones"—weakness in some form, weakness despised, down-trodden, sorely tempted, much degraded, on the brink of perishing. Ask how it has all come to pass, and why its state is still so pitiable. Understand, too, why it is that other attempts to restore have failed, and why there be many that say that no restoration is possible. And then confront all these cries of despondency, however proud the tone with which they announce their conclusions, with the one strong declaration of your Master: "It is not the will of your Father which is in heaven that one of His little ones should perish."

The power of this truth is greater than the power of all the other half truths. In the faith of Christ many have rested from their labours—may sleep in the churchyards of England, and many sleep here beneath our feet, or beneath the stone floor of other cathedrals—who have lived and died proving, as well as believing, that this promise was true. They have taken Christ at His word. They have learned from Himself to know the true mind of His Father. They have proved that what was impossible with man was possible, and even easy, and at last triumphant, with God.

He cannot be accounted you—g who outliveth the old man.—*Sir Thomas Browne.*

EARLY and provident fear is the mother of safety.—*Edmund Burke.*

BETTER to carry away a little of the life of God in our souls, than if we were able to repeat every word of every sermon we have heard.—*DeSales.*

*Miltman's "History of Latin Christianity," Book vii., Chap. vi.

* Preached in Westminster Abbey.