

Garments Undeiled and White Robes.

A sermon delivered on Sunday morning, May 11th, 1902, at Union Chapel Manchester, by

REV. ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D. D., LITT. D.

"Thou hast a few names, even in Sardis, which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy."—Rev. 3:4.

Persecution or heresy is not the worst thing that can befall a church. This community of Christians in Sardis had neither the one nor the other. It was not worth the world's while to persecute a dead church, which just answered the world's purpose. There was not life enough in it to grow heresy; the people were not interested enough in Christian truth to think about it at all, and so they were in no danger of thinking about it wrongly. It had no enemies, it had no errors, it had no faults, it had—if we may use the vulgarism—"no nothing." "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead," and so there was no more to be said about it. Torpor, intellectual and moral, and spiritual death, characterized the community. And this is like a great many churches now-a-days. But even in such a community, that had "a name to live and was dead," there were "a few names" that answered to realities, persons who had not defiled their garments. So I suppose there always are, in the most corrupt ecclesiastical communities, those who are real Christian people, and we are not to say of any church, however worldly, however little it may present the features of the Christian life, that it is wholly given over to evil and to godlessness. Let us remember that when we are dealing out our judgments upon communities that are obviously far beneath the level on which all Christian communities should stand; and if we are going to be censorious, let us remember that the Eye that sees most clearly discerned some that were alive in the midst of that moribund church of Sardis, and was as glad to praise them as plain-spoken to censure the others.

We have here in the words of my text,

I. A REMARKABLE SKETCH OF THE CONDITION OF THESE FAITHFUL FEW.

They had "not defiled their garments." We might have expected that the accurate form of the antithesis between the faithful few and the unfaithful many would have been preserved, and that, as the latter had been branded as being possessors of "a name to live" whilst they were dead, the former would have been designated as "a few names" that lived. But instead of that, the contrast is drawn in a somewhat different fashion, and as opposite to the deadness there is presented purity. That seems to suggest what I do not dwell upon, that the true consequence and manifestation of the life which was denied to the mass is cleanness of character and of conduct. The contradiction of spiritual death is moral purity.

I suppose I need not remind you how, throughout Scripture, that metaphor of the garment means neither more nor less than the character into which a man has shaped himself, and which, as it were, is the garb in which he is made visible to the world. The robe that is not defiled is not exactly the person, but rather the character which, so to speak, invests the person, and is that which is visible to other eyes. And this garment is woven by each of us for ourselves; as the silkworm spins its cocoon, as the mollusc secretes the shell in which it lives. We deposit character, we weave, in the mystic loom of endeavour and of act, the vesture which we wear, and sometimes we weave for ourselves a poisoned shirt, like the mythological hero's, which burns into the flesh as it had been fire.

But that little handful in Sardis, says my text, had "not defiled their garments." Ah! brethren, the garments that we weave are woven of defiled yarn, and unless they have been made clean they never can be kept clean. And so before the words of my text, "they have not defiled their garments," can be applicable, something else must have been done. The garments must have been cleansed. How had they been? "Blessed" are they that wash their robes, and make them white in the blood of the Lamb." You go into a dyeworks, and in some processes there you will see yarn of one color dipped into a liquid of another color, and coming out a third color. So the foulness of our robe, the stained character, that we all have draped ourselves in, the black of our garments, plunged into the crimson bath, comes forth a radiant white. Such is the miracle of the chemistry of the dye of Heaven. Then, and not till then, dear friend, dawns upon a man the possibility that cleanness acquired may be cleanness retained, and that even in the midst of a community which, like the community of Sardis, because it was dead was foul, we may "keep ourselves unspotted from the world," and from the worst world which has "christened" itself a church.

For, however low may be the tone—and alas! we have to confess that far too low—is the tone—of the average Christian life of this day, there is no need why we should keep on the same level as the men round us. But it is possible for us in the Arctic regions to keep our thermometers far above freezing-point and at blood-heat, and it is possible to walk in the midst of a moribund church, all the more tingling and instinct with life to the finger-

tips because of the death that is round us. Wherever there has been the most damning departure from the morals and lofty tone of true Christianity, there, thank God! have been men who have lived nearest to Him. The greatest saints have come out of the most unsaint-like communities. Ages of decay have always been ages in which the faithful few have clung closest to their Lord; and if you want to find bright and radiant souls in the Christian church, go and look for them in the places where the world has most entirely made inroads upon the church. Thank God! in this realm of Christian experience, "action and reaction are equal and contrary." It is seldom, though it sometimes happens, that lofty mountain ranges spring from the very sea level. Decaying churches compel some men to be saints. If it is possible to be so it is our duty. We, too, live amidst a social state that calls itself Christian. For us, too, the average standard of the Christian life in the people around us is low. The more reason that we should lift it up and make it high.

Not to defile the robe seems but a little thing. It is a mere negative virtue, but there will be no negative, avoiding of defilement, unless there is a positive effort. "Be not conformed to this world." What is the use of saying that, unless you go on to say, "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds?" It is not enough to say, "So did not I" unless "the fear of the Lord," which compels to non-participation in common evils, and to not lowering our standard to the common level, also impels us to large positive achievements of unworldliness, of spirituality, of concentration and consecration, of devotion and of conformity to Jesus Christ. The names that had "not defiled their garments" were the names that had, day by day, sought more and more, because of the condition of things around them, to make for themselves a loftier ideal, and to give all their energies to turning the ideal into a solid reality.

But how is this to be done? The context suggests methods. There we read "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die. . . . Remember, therefore, how thou hast received and heard; and hold fast and repent." May I put it all into three words—watch, gird, wash. Watch—lest the atmosphere around you lull you to slumber. Watch—lest you "learn their ways, and get a snare unto your souls." Watch—lest you be tempted to adopt the teachings—I mean the moral teachings—and to imitate the conduct of the multitudes of professing Christians who, by their inconsistencies, are dragging down the standard of Christian life everywhere. Watch—lest you be tempted to say, "When you are at Rome you must do as Rome does. Why should I stand apart, and be so unlike my neighbors?" Why? Because so many of your neighbors, even in churches, are so unlike your example.

Gird up the garment. Gather it close. When a woman walks the filthy pavements one of her hands is occupied in holding up her skirts. If we go with our characters loosely diffused, and let them come into contact with everything we pass in the street, we shall carry home microbes and filth enough every time we go out. "Gird up the loins of our mind" by resolute concentration on the one purpose until you walk the golden pavements where there is no pollution, and where the robe may be loosely flowing and yet be unstained.

Wash. "He that is bathed needeth not save to wash his feet," but if he is to be "clean every whit" he does need to wash them of the pollution contracted by the miry ways of daily pilgrimage. And so when our watchfulness teaches us that we have failed in girding up the loins of our mind, and so have contracted defilement, let us hasten back again to where we first of all received cleansing, and say to him, "Lord! not my robe only, nor my feet only, but also my hands and my head." So shall we "keep ourselves unspotted from the world," and efface the spots which we may have acquired.

And now a word about another thing, we have in this last.

II. THE WORTHINESS OF THE FAITHFUL FEW.

I do not need to say much about that. Some people who do not see Christian truths in their completeness and their perspective, may start back at the notion of any man, even if he has thus kept himself unspotted, being worthy of eternal life. I am not going to discuss that question. What I wish to point out is that in this phrase, and in other parallel places in the New Testament, such as "they that are counted worthy to attain to that world," or "worthy of the kingdom," or "worthy of the calling"—that these phrases do not imply what we call merit, but they imply what I may most simply designate as fitness; or, to use a more imposing word, congruity. That is to say, the thought underlying these words is just this, that in the other life, as in this life, a man on the whole gets what he is fit for. You may call it "deserve" if you like, but the true notion is simply that of congruity. " whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" teaches just the same lesson. And so the great truth that comes out of that phrase which sounds startling to some, is that we are not to suppose that a man is received into Heaven by an arbitrary favor or sent to a place of punishment by reason of any stern decree of God the angry Judge, but that the future, even

more than the present, both in regard to inward condition and circumstances, is but the net outcome and result of the life here. We are made worthy by faith in Jesus Christ. Yes. But we are also made worthy in a sense meant in the text by our keeping our garments clean. For a man who passes out of life with a character stained, and dyed in grain, as it were, with worldliness and sensuality, and God-forgetting, how would it be possible to put that man into the state which we call Heaven?

Heaven is a state rather than a place. There will be place also, but a state is the essential element in the conception. We shall each go to our native country, and will have what we are fit for. "By transgression he fell that he might go to his own place." That is the central idea. Like a ray of light coming from a fixed object, life spreads, as it were, and away out yonder the beam is the same, but its bounds are enlarged. Give a little photograph to an operator, and he manipulates it, and brings out an enlarged copy. Such is the relation in which the future stands to the present. The reward is the continuation and enlargement of the works and character here. "They are worthy!" Lastly we have III. THE REWARD OF THE WORTHY; THE FAITHFUL FEW.

"They shall walk with me in white." What a multitude of great and partly ineffable thoughts and hopes spring out of that promise! "In white"—this book of the Revelation is all radiant with that colour. We read of the "hairs as white as snow" of the great King-Priest. We read of the white stone given to the Victors. We read of the "white throne" on which God sits. We read of the "white robes" which are the righteousness of the saints. We read of the white cloud, the seat of one like unto the Son of Man. We read of the "white horses" on which, in the last great battle, the Conqueror and his hosts ride forth. In all these emblems as in this of my text, there is suggested not merely the dead white of a bloodless purity and ascetic saintliness, but the radiant, lustrous white as of sunshine upon a snow field than which there is nothing more brilliant and more glorious in the whole scheme of colouration. The white of victory, the white of the light that is inaccessible and full of glory, the white of purity makes lustrous robes in which the worthy ones shall be arrayed. "They shall walk with Me." There is the heart of it all; "with Me"—which is far better. Companionship is suggested. If two walk "together," they must be "agreed," and so identity of aim is hinted at. A little child walks beside his father—he tries to lengthen his footsteps to keep step with the parent; and we, if we walk with Him, are not only journeying to the same point, but in some measure are able to keep step with him, and "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth!"

"They shall walk"—liberty; progress calm advance; continuous increase. These, and a thousand other as yet unnamed and inconceivable glories and greatnesses, are dissolved, as the old story has it the prodigal queen did with her jewels—into one life-giving draught of promise.

But all begins with "washing the robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb." And so the last beatitude of Scripture, contained in the final chapter of this book, may seal our meditations this morning—"Blessed are they who wash their robes, that they may have right to the Tree of Life; and may enter in through the gate into the City."—Baptist Times and Freeman.

Our Great Shame.

BY GEO. W. TRUETT.

What is it? It is to the lamentable and general ignorance that obtains respecting the Bible. This blessed book, to be sure, is now being printed and widely scattered as never before; but, it is yet true, as it was true of old, that the people are perishing from the lack of its knowledge. It is true that the old book is in many, many homes; it has a prominent place on many centre tables; in many instances the copies there seen are of the best binding; in divers ways it is apparent that it is the object of considerable comment and admiration. But, for all that, the painful truth may not and must not be concealed, that the people, with painfully few exceptions, are not really studying the Bible. Perhaps they are studying it more slowly than at any former time since apostolic times; but, granting that, surely no right thinking Christian can look with complacency upon the meagre knowledge that the people generally have of the Bible. If any one is skeptical as to the prevalence of such ignorance, let him in any way that he chooses, test the people's real knowledge of the old book. The revelations awaiting him will fill him with surprise. He will find that even multitudes of Christians have never read the Bible through even one time. Is it any wonder that they are feeble, timid, wavering and unfruitful? He will find that many who read it, read only one or two chapters a week, and read those very hurriedly. He will find that a vast deal of the reading is without any intelligent and systematic method. He will find a great deal about the matter to give him pain, and it is hoped that will inspire him to seek to improve such a deplorable situation.