

Feeding in the Ways.

A sermon delivered at Union Chapel, Manchester, by

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

"They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places."—Isaiah 49:9.

This is part of the prophet's glowing description of the return of the captives, under the figure of a flock fed by a great shepherd. We have often seen, I suppose, a flock of sheep driven along a road; some of them hastily trying to snatch a mouthful from the dusty grass by the wayside. Little can they get there; they have to wait until they reach some green pasture in which they can be folded. This flock shall "feed in the ways," as they go they will find nourishment. That is not all; the top of the mountains is not the place where grass grows. There are bare, savage cliffs, from which every particle of soil has been washed by furious torrents, or the scanty vegetation has been burnt up by the fierce "sunbeams like swords." There the wild deer and the ravens live; the sheep feed down in the valleys. But "their pasture shall be in all high places." The literal rendering is even more emphatic: "Their pasture shall be in all bare heights," where a sudden verdure springs to feed them according to their need. Whilst, then, this prophecy is originally intended simply to suggest the abundant supplies that were to be provided for the band of exiles as they came back from Babylon, there lie in it great and blessed principles which belong to the Christian pilgrimage, and the flock that follows Christ.

They who follow him, says my text, to begin with, shall find in the dusty paths of common life, and in all the smallnesses and distractions of daily duty, nourishment for their spirits. Do you remember what Jesus said? "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work." We, too, may have the same meat to eat which the world knows not of, and he will give that hidden manna to the combatant as well as "to him that overcometh." In the measure in which "we follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth," in that measure do we find—like the stores of provisions that Arctic explorers came upon, *cached* for them—food in the wilderness, and nourishment for our highest life in our common work. That is a great promise, and it is a great duty. It is a promise the fulfilment of which is plainly guaranteed by the very nature of the case. Religion is meant to direct conduct, and the smallest affairs of life are to come under its imperial control, and the only way by which a man can get any good out of his Christianity is by living it. It is when he sets to work on the principles of the gospel that the gospel proves itself to be a reality in his blessed experience. It is when he does the smallest duties from the great motives that these great motives are strengthened by exercise, as every motive is. If you wish to weaken the influence of any principle upon you, do not work it out, and it will wither and die. If a man would grasp the fulness of spiritual sustenance which lies in the gospel of Jesus Christ, let him go to work on the basis of the gospel, and he "shall feed in the ways," and common duties will minister strength to him instead of taking strength from him. We can make the smallest daily incidents minister to our growth and our spiritual strength, because if we thus do them, they will bring to us attestations of the reality of the faith by which we act in them. For convincing a man that a lifebuoy is reliable there is nothing like having had experience of its power to hold his head above the waves when he has been cast into them. Live your Christianity, and it will attest itself. There will come, besides that, the blessed memory of past times in which we trusted in the Lord and were lightened; we obeyed God and found his promises true, we risked all for God, and found that we had all more abundantly. It is only an active Christian life that is a nourished and growing Christian life.

The food which God gives us is not only to be taken by faith, but it has to be made ours more abundantly by work. Saint Augustine said, in another connection, "Believe, and thou has eaten." Yes, that is blessedly true, and it needs to be supplemented by "they shall feed in the ways," and their work will bring them nourishment.

But this is a great duty as well as a great promise. How many of us Christian people have but little experience of getting nearer to God because of our daily occupations. To by far the larger number of us, in by far the greater space of time in our lives, our daily work is a distraction, and tends to obscure the face of God to us, and to shut us out from many of the storehouses of sustenance by which a quiet contemplative faith is refreshed. Therefore we need times of special prayer and remoteness from daily work; and there will be very little realization of the nourishing power of common duties unless there is familiar to us also the entrance into the "secret place of the Most High," where he feeds His children on the bread of life.

We must not neglect either of these two ways by which our souls are fed, and we must ever remember that the reason why so many Christian people cannot set to their seal that this promise is true, lies mainly in this, that the ways on which they go are either not the ways that

the Shepherd has walked in before them, or that they are trodden in forgetfulness of Him, and without looking to His guidance. The work that is to minister to the Christian life must be work conformed to the Christian ideal, and as if we fling ourselves into our secular business, as it is called—if you go to your counting-houses and shops, and I go to my desk and books, and forget the Shepherd, then there is no grass by the wayside for such sheep. But if we subject our wills to him, and if in all that we do we are trying to refer to him and are working in dependence on him, and for him, then the poorest work, the meanest, the most entirely secular, will be a source of Christian nourishment and blessing. We have to settle for ourselves whether we shall be distracted, torn asunder by pressure of cares and responsibilities and activities, or whether, far below the agitated surface which is ruffled by the winds, and borne along by the tidal wave, there will be a great central depth, still but not stagnant—whether we shall be fed, or starved in our Christian life by the pressure of our worldly tasks. The choice is before us. "They shall feed in the ways," if the ways are Christ's ways, and he is at every step their Shepherd.

Further, my text suggests that for those who follow the Lamb there shall be greenness and pasture on the bare heights. Strip that part of our text of its metaphor, and it just 'comes to the blessed old thought, which I hope many of us have known to be a true one, that the times of sorrow are the times when a Christian may have the most of the presence and strength of God. "In the days of famine they shall be satisfied," and up among the most barren cliffs, where there is not a bite for any four-footed creature, they shall find springing grass and watered pastures. Our prophet puts the same thought, under a kindred though somewhat different metaphor, in another place in this book, where he says: "I will open rivers in high places." That is clean contrary to nature. The rivers do not run on the mountaintops, but down in the low ground. But for us as the darkness thickens, the pillar may glow the brighter for us, as the gloom increases, the glory may grow for us, the less of nutriment or refreshment earth affords, the more abundantly does God spread his stores before us, if we are wise enough to take them. It is an experience, I suppose, common to all devout men, that their times of most rapid growth were their times of trouble. In nature winter stops all vegetable life. In grace the growing time is the winter. They tell us that up in the Arctic regions the reindeer will scratch away the snow, and get at the succulent mass that lies beneath it. When that Shepherd, whom himself has known sorrows, leads us up into those barren regions of perpetual cold and snow he teaches us, too, how to brush it away, and find what we need buried and kept warm beneath the white shroud. It is the prerogative of the Christian soul, not to be without trouble, but to turn the trouble into nourishment, and to feed on the barest heights.

May I turn these latter words of our text a somewhat different way, attaching to them a meaning which does not belong to them, but by way of accommodation? If Christian people want to have the bread of God abundantly, they must climb. It is to those who live on the heights that provision comes according to their need. If you would have your Christian life starved go down into the fertile valleys. Remember Abraham and Lot, and the choice the two men made. The one said: "I want cattle and wealth, and I am going down to Sodom. Never mind about the vices of the inhabitants. There is money to be made there." Abraham said: "I am going to stay up here on the heights, the breezy, barren heights," and God stayed beside him. If we go down we strave our souls. If we desire them to be fat and flourishing, nourished with the hidden manna, then we must go up. "Their pasture shall be in all high places."

Before I finish let me remind you of the application of the words of my text, which we owe to the New Testament. The context runs, as you will remember, "they shall not hunger nor thirst, neither shall the heat nor the sun smite them. For he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of fire shall he guide them." And you remember the beautiful variation and deepening of this promise in that great saying which the Seer in the Apocalypse gives us, when he speaks of those "who follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth," and are led, "by living fountains of water," where "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." So we are entitled to believe that on the highest heights far above the valley of weeping, there shall be immortal food, and that on the high places of the mountains of God, there shall be pastures that never withers. The prophet Ezekiel has a similar variation of my text, and transfers it from the captives on their march homewards, to the happy pilgrims who have got home, when he says: "I will bring them into their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel"—when they have reached them at last after the weary march—"I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the mountains of Israel shall their fold be; there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel."—Baptist Times.

Prayer and Progress.

Prayer is necessary to progress. That principle is fundamental for the construction of character and the conduct of affairs. The world is fond of boasting of its progress, while half of the time it does not understand in what true advance consists. All progression is not progress. A march in the wrong direction, demanding eventually a countermarch back, contributes nothing to the success of a campaign. A great deal of the motion and commotion in the world represents just this sort of tramping about to no purpose. It is activity, but not advance.

It is here that the office of prayer comes in usefully, since prayer secures that wisdom from on high which directs the steps of a good man into the path of a true progress. The sincerely prayerful man will lose no time in the by-paths of sin or the mist covered morasses of bootless theorizing. Instead of remaining a moral truant or tramp, he will become a pilgrim to a definite heavenly goal, and a spiritual discover, adding treasures of great value to the knowledge and culture of mankind. If any man lacks wisdom let him ask of God. There is no other way to avoid not only the pitfalls or a positive sin, but as well, the sinuous and tangled trails of profitless speculation or self-seeking along which multitudes stumble and stagger to their eternal hurt and undoing.

While therefore the age proudly boasts of the advance which it assumes is being made in all directions, for getting that change is not necessarily improvement, and rarely thinking of the perils that reside in a prayerless "progress," the humble Christian believer looks upon the whirl and swirl of life about him, not indeed with cowardly misgiving but with a careful concern lest he himself be thereby drawn away from his heavenward course, and become a creature made subject to vanity rather than a hopeful heir of immortal blessedness. If there is any quality characteristic of a Christian as distinct from a wordling, it is the power of discrimination possessed by the former which enables him to disentangle the trivial from the essential in existence, and the permanent values of life from the fleeting shows which so delude and destroy the man of fleshly disposition. It is prayer which leads the believer to associate himself with virtues rather than vanities, and which affords him that daily grace and guidance which are necessary to the making of any real advance in moral manhood.

This truth the church in theory accepts, however it may fail thoroughly to improve it in practice. In almost every sanctuary service the praises of prayer are sung in measured metres and often in faltering tones, thick with emotion. The great need and duty is to impress on now worldly men a sense of the importance of mixing prayer with plans and purposes, so that their enterprises, whether commonplace or colossal, may not prove Babel-like in their folly, but evince the permanence and power of massive architectural structures. We do not hesitate to say that whether the enterprise be the laying of an Atlantic cable, the bridging of a Niagara, the sanitation of a Havana, the education of Cuban population, the development of an American public school system, or the subduing of the Philippines by force both of arms and mercy, prayer will help, and prayerlessness will hinder. More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of, and conversely many enterprises, seemingly successful for a time, finally utterly fail, and meanwhile are attended with sore loss of life or property or commercial credit, because their promoters were not themselves promoted by Providence, and never asked or obtained the blessing of Heaven on their labors.

There cannot be no real and lasting progress either for a man or a nation where reference is not constantly made to the will of the God who presides over all, unfolding destinies, and the sooner humanity understands this the better. In all ages of the world since Adam fell foolish and obstinate men have been attempting the impious and futile experiment of living life without God, but such, as the apostle intimates, have no hope in this world, or worse yet, in the world to come. Mankind needs to be convinced of the truth of the principle implied in the homely Oriental proverb: "Prayer and provender hinder no man's journey." It helps to pray. It assists hope and inspires zeal and clarifies the judgment to look to God for direction in all the affairs of this perplexing, often fairly bewildering, earthly life. Happy is the man who knows how to pray, because the Master has taught him, and who knows too how to acquit and familiarize others with this sacred secret.—New York Observer.

A Personal God.

The existence of a Personal God is fundamental to our religion. How has "modern thought" affected this doctrine? Materialism asserts that it is all a fallacy; that matter and force are the only factors in the universe. But who will say that atheism is gaining ground, or that her theory of the universe is more satisfactory to reason than that which Christianity postulates? However it came there, nothing can eradicate the idea of God from the human mind. Its constituent elements are