

## GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA.

The tenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada was opened last night in Saint James Square Presbyterian Church. In the absence of the Moderator, Dr. King, who left for Britain in April in the interests of Manitoba College, the sermon was preached by the Rev. Dr. Cochran, of Brantford, the ex-moderator.

After the usual devotional exercises of prayer and praise, Dr. Cochran chose as his text the two following passages of Scripture. Jeremiah iii. 3, "The showers have been withholden, and there hath been no latter rain," and Ezekiel xxiv. 20, "I will make them and the places round about my hill a blessing, and I will cause the shower to come down in his season; there shall be showers of blessing." The following is the substance of his discourse.

In the fourteenth chapter of this book of Jeremiah, we have a striking picture of the terrible horrors, resulting from a protracted drought, when the heavens are as brass and the earth is as iron. "Judah mourneth, and the gates thereof languish, they are black unto the ground, and the cry of Jerusalem is gone up. And their nobles have sent their little ones to the waters, they came to the pits, and found no water; they returned with their vessels empty, they were ashamed and confounded, and covered their heads. Yea, the hind also calved in the field, and forsook it, because there was no grass. And the wild asses did stand in the high places, they snuffed up the wind like dragons, their eyes did fail, because there was no grass. The cause of such a judgment we are at no loss to understand. It was for the iniquities and backsliding of his people, that God sealed up the clouds of water, and brought barrenness and famine upon the inhabitants of the land. By such dealings God would have them realize that He was cognizant of their sinful conduct, and would be avenged because of their ingratitude.

In our own climate we know full well the evil effects of drought. Although such a calamity has never prevailed to the extent of famine, in some cases it has materially affected the social comforts of the inhabitants, and paralyzed the energies of commerce. At such a season of the year as the present, we need frequent showers to promote vegetation, and ripen the crops of the field. A few weeks scorching heat, untempered by genial and copious rains, makes a vast difference in the returns of the husbandman.

It is entirely different in other portions of the globe. In Egypt the Nile periodically overflows its banks and hastens growth. By a wise arrangement of Providence to meet the lack of rain and dew, it seldom fails at the appointed time. In other countries provision is made in the soil and roots, to remain for a much longer period without rain than in our Northern Zone. Although the ground may be dry and burned, the roots carry with them a life superior to the accidents and severity of drought. In our climate, ere the refreshing rain came down, the seeds and roots would be beyond all hope of germination, but there they quicken into life, unaffected by the long periods of scorching heat, that have retarded their growth and seemingly exhausted their vitality.

The analogies that exist between the natural and the spiritual world are many and obvious. It may not, therefore, be unprofitable in present circumstances to enquire into the causes and consequences of spiritual drought in the Church and in individual souls, and also for our encouragement to glance at the promises of spiritual refreshing that are promised the Church under the New Testament dispensation. The condition described by the prophet Jeremiah is a sad one. "The showers have been withholden, and there have been no latter rain"—that of Ezekiel is full of encouragement and hope. "I will make them and the places round about my hill a blessing, and I will cause the shower to come down in his season, there shall be showers of blessing."

I remark first, that in the Church of God as in the natural world we need constant refreshing showers to promote the growth of individual Christians and advance the cause of righteousness. Occasions indeed intervene when more is needed in the natural world than the refreshing shower, when the rain descends not gently and noiselessly but in torrents, tearing deep furrows and fissures in the earth, and crushing the tender plants that cannot stand such violent treatment. No one disputes the value of such occasional deluges, whatever temporary hurt may follow, but the very necessity for such avalanches of rain proves how much better are the nightly dews and timely showers of spring and summer. It is just because these have been withheld for a protracted period that floods of water, accompanied by the thunder storm and lightning, are demanded to drench the ground, purify the atmosphere, and save from famine.

Now, in the history of God's kingdom upon earth, there are periods when revivals of religion are so powerful as to indicate an unusual abundance of spiritual feeling. Without such seasons, certain churches would lose all their vitality. As we thank God for unusual deluges of rain, to make the burnt up grass put on new verdure, and fill the heads of corn, so we have good cause to feel grateful when such

mighty convulsions and spiritual quickenings occur in Christian communities. But better than the occasional thunder storm are the regular descending rains and the nightly dew drops that fringe the leaves of flowers and sparkle like diamonds on the grass, and better than exceptional and wonderful outpourings of God's Spirit are the constant manifestations of His grace, unattended though they may be by moral revolutions, but not less quietly but effectively, building up and maturing souls for the paradise above. But for these long seasons of drought, when the ground is chapt, and the wells are waterless, and the wild asses snuff up the wind like dragons, and their eyes fail them because there is no grass, there would be no occasion for the rain storms that refresh the thirsty ground, and, but for long periods of spiritual decay in the Church, when prayer is fitful and Christian activity all but dead, there would be less occasion for special agencies, which the Holy Spirit often blesses to revive declining churches and prevent individuals from complete paralysis of religious feeling.

Every church should seek constant baptisms of the Holy Spirit. If we suffer from spiritual droug, let us not foolishly talk about a mysterious Providence that waters other portions of the vineyard and leaves our special corner dry and parched. It is the great desire of Christ that His Church should prosper—that it should be continuously faithful—that, without long periods of weakness and inactivity, it should go forward to greater conquests. If it is otherwise, let us see to it, as ministers and office-bearers and members, that we are not guilty in the sight of God. Where prayer is restrained, and family religion is neglected, and attendance upon ordinances is fitful, where there is greater relish for the pleasures and amusements of the fashionable world than fellowship with the unseen and the eternal, nothing can be expected but the decline of piety. "The showers are withholden, and there is no latter rain."

This leads me to remark secondly, that seasons of spiritual drought are generally the consequences of despising, or misimproving the means of grace. The whole history of Israel is evidence of this fact. For their sins and provocations, God frequently visited His chosen people with a famine of bread as well as a famine of the Word of life. Temporal mercies when undervalued or abused are often withdrawn, and Gospel blessings when slighted are often diminished. "Jerusalem," says the prophet, "remembered in the days of her affliction and of her miseries all her pleasant things which she had in the days of old, when her people fell into the hand of the enemy and none did help her." In the silence and solitude of the Babylonian captivity, how strikingly was this verified, as sitting by the streams of Babel the Jews thought upon the feast: "We wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

A famine of bread is a terrible scourge, but far greater is the evil when the candlestick of ordinances is removed, and men perish for divine sustenance. This was the culmination of God's anger against His chosen people as well as the unfaithful churches of Asia Minor. "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the Word of God." Again speaking by the mouth of Isaiah, and reproving them for despising their privileges, he says: "I will lay the vineyards waste, it shall not be pruned nor digged. I will also command the clouds that they rain not upon it." And to the church in Ephesus John is commanded to say: "Remember from whence thou art fallen and repent, and do the first works, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place except thou repent."

Worldly minded men, cannot feel the loss of public or private means of grace, but God's own children deeply mourn the withdrawal of such privileges. The Christians of Antioch, when Chrysostom their minister was banished, judged it a greater deprivation than the absence of the sun in the firmament. In the days of Jewish persecution when God's servants were hurried away to martyrdom their flocks met them on the way to prison with their little ones in their arms, and, throwing themselves at their feet, cried out:—

"Who shall instruct these poor babes? Who shall ease our afflicted consciences? Who shall lead us in the way of life?" Nor can there be anything but intense sorrow, where Gospel ordinances long enjoyed and appreciated are removed. The prosperity of the nation, the stability of civil government, and the prevalence of virtue, as well as the salvation of souls, depend upon the continuance of the faithful preaching of the Word.

I remark, thirdly, that seasons of spiritual drought are not less fatal to the interests of true religion, because they steal upon us insensibly and unobserved. It is so with drought in the natural world. We cannot predict its coming, nor are we probably aware of its length, until we see the sad results in the burnt up ground. One, two, or three weeks pass without rain, before we begin to realize the actual condition of affairs, or are alarmed for the future. It is just so in periods of spiritual decline. Outwardly we see no symptoms of change. The church is open. The means of grace are waited upon, after a certain formal routine.

The prayer-meeting is kept alive. There is the usual amount of religious talk and prayer for the extension of Christ's kingdom. But in all this, there is no real longing after greater holiness and perfection of character. At last we begin to see a palpable deterioration in the spiritual power of the membership; a deadness of feeling and indifference, that threaten disaster and ruin to the visible body of believers. Nay, in some cases things are so hopeless that there is scarce vitality remaining to measure the extent of the evil, or to agonize in prayer for Almighty aid to quicken the dead!

Nearly every congregation contains more or less nominal Christians, whose zeal and enthusiasm has sadly diminished since their reception into the church. The gleanings of former harvests, were more than the entire vintage now. The things which remain are ready to die. A spiritual lethargy and lukewarmness in the service of the Master, strangely contradictory of the glowing fervour of bygone years, prevails. The heart is uncultivated. There is a sourness in the conversation that ill comports with the disciples of the meek and lowly Jesus. Means are no longer used to keep the graces polished, and the armour sharp and glittering. There is little or none of the pleasure formerly experienced in Christian fellowship in sacramental seasons and the general work of the denomination. The soil is hard unmoistened by the refreshing rain—unproductive and unprofitable.

Need I say that such a condition is dangerous? It is a dishonourable one for any child of God to occupy. It may not be fatal, for the ploughshare of severe discipline can bring the most callous backslider to consciousness of guilt and penitence for sin:

"Spent barren land you can restore and nourish;  
Decayed Christians God can cause to flourish."

But it is only after severe pruning that spiritual life is revived, and the soul restored to its normal condition. Before the dews of heaven can benefit such souls, and the fallow ground become productive, a preparatory process is needful to quicken the hard, stolid, passionless affections, and convulse to their very foundations that deep seated avarice and indolence which prevent consecration to the cause of God.

A worldly minded church, however generous and lavish its contributions may be to charitable and missionary objects, is the greatest of all hindrances to the spread and success of the Gospel. The more numerous the membership in such a case, the greater is the evil. However sincere young converts are in entering such a communion, unless special grace prevents, their piety will soon reach the low level of the mass. Apart from the constant operations of God's spirit, manifested in holy deeds of self denial, a church may become a hindrance to the progress of the truth, a stumbling block to enquirers, and a byword on the lips of scoffers.

This brings us briefly to speak of the passage in Ezekiel so full of encouragement and hope to all who seek the prosperity of Zion. The language refers to Messianic times when God's controversy with His people should cease, the scattered ones be restored to Jerusalem, and blessings in large abundance crown the latter days. Peace is to prevail throughout the land, the wild beasts of the forest are no longer to molest or terrify the traveller, so that he may dwell in the wilderness in safety, and sleep in the woods unharmed. The trees of the field are to yield their fruit and the land give forth its increase, and the yoke of slavery be forever broken. For in the words already quoted, which may be regarded as a summation of all these covenanted mercies—"I will make them, saith the Lord, and the places round about My hill a blessing, and I will cause the showers to come down in his season, there shall be showers of blessing"—there can be no doubt, I think, but that the prophecy refers to the Gospel dispensation. The final ingathering of the Jews, the restoration of Mount Zion, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, belong to a period which precedes the winding up of the present dispensation. The nature of the blessings spoken of, however, admit of different interpretations. Is it temporal blessings only of which the prophet speaks—or spiritual, or both combined? Are we to take the language in a literal or figurative sense? Are we to understand the seasonable showers mentioned as nothing beyond the spring and summer rains, or are the words typical of heavenly blessings, and the outpouring of God's Spirit upon His chosen people?

In this primary signification, I doubt not, the prophet referred to temporal blessings. If you read over carefully the judgments threatened Israel you will find that the blessings promised in the context are exactly their counterpart. The judgments included years of trouble and desolation, famine and pestilence, war and bloodshed, calamities of every form and degree of severity, even approaching to the bondage of Egypt, and the sufferings of the wilderness. God's anger was to be manifested in these more tangible and striking evils. His presence as the avenger of their sins was to be seen in the withdrawal of all those comforts which constitute national prosperity, and the prevalence of all those plagues which accompany overthrow and destruction. But now the scene changes. The temporal blessings long withheld are restored. Instead of famine there is plenty, instead of war, peace; instead of internal commotion and dis-