

St. John's Church Record, And Parish Notes.

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THE SUNDAY SCHOOL.

The subject of Sunday schools, their reason of existence, their weak points, their due principles of management, their place in the fabric of religious education,—all these matters have been discussed from all points of view in the course of the last month. By a curious coincidence, the same subject had been debated at the September meeting of the Clerical Association, when an able and amusing, if slightly paradoxical paper was read by Dr. Williams, whose prescription for the weakness of the Sunday School was none other than the Japanese *Hari-kari*, or 'happy dispatch.' But he did not obtain a proselyte among his clerical hearers, and in the course of later discussions, even the least laudatory advocate maintained the necessity of the Sunday School's existence.

Two points more especially seem deserving of notice in relation to this subject. It is clear that, even under most favorable circumstances, the Sunday School has a hard task. Helped but little by home teaching, enjoying the meagre opportunity of about forty minutes instruction each week, it needs the concurrence of skilful sympathetic teachers and willing pupils, to attain any good results. And even when we have secured our teachers,—do they teach? It would be ungrateful to criticise voluntary and loving help, giving all that it can: let us look higher. If teaching be an art in itself,—can our clergy claim to possess it? Who does not remember Charles Dickens' satirical, but often too true description of the clerical address to an infant school, "full of words like 'sepulchre',—so familiar to childhood." We recollect George Eliot's inimitable description of the Rev. Amos Barton's sermon to the aged paupers:—

"He talked of Israel and its sins, of chosen vessels, of the Paschal lamb, of blood as a medium of reconciliation; and he strove in this way to convey religious truth within reach of the pauper mind. This very morning, the first lesson was the twelfth chapter of Exodus, and Mr. Barton's exposition turned on unleavened bread. Nothing in the world more suited to the simple understanding than instruction through familiar types and symbols! But there is always this danger attending it, that the interest or comprehension of your hearers may stop short precisely at the point where your spiritual interpretation begins. And Mr. Barton succeeded in carrying his hearers' imagination to the dough tub, but unfortunately was not able to carry it upwards from that well known object to the unknown truths which it was intended to

shadow forth. Alas! a natural incapacity for teaching, finished by keeping terms at the university, is not apparently the medium through which Christian doctrine can be instilled into ignorant minds."

The remedy for this, both for the clergy as for the Sunday school teachers, is to learn the art of teaching. They must not rest content with the old methods which were proved failures except with clever children. If they cannot be present when a really competent teacher takes a class, they can enquire as to his *modus operandi*, and they have their own material in their own class, not indeed for fanciful crotchets, but for reasonable experiments in methods of tuition, duly noting and comparing results.

The other point of serious importance is the material of instruction. The time being so limited, the question of selection becomes of the first importance. And here, most unfortunately, the opportunity for controversy presents itself, and the utterly false and illogical issue of 'Catechism *versus* Bible,' is enunciated and becomes subject for declamation.

Every reasonable and instructed member of the Church of England accepts Prayer book and Bible as supplementary not antagonistic elements. The Bible is first and last, the only source of revealed instruction, the only criterion of orthodox doctrine. But deduced from it, "by certain warrant of Holy Scripture," we possess creeds which focus the teaching of the Bible in concentrated light; we have prayers which echo the spirit and follow mainly the words of Biblical devotion; we have a Catechism which compounds the material of the Christian layman's faith, the Apostles' Creed, Decalogue, and Lord's Prayer. If all are agreed as to the substance, there remains only the questions of proportion. There may be defect or neglect on either side. That the present age, with all its ecclesiastical zeal, has lost too much of the old familiarity with the Bible, is undeniable. We may know more about Saints' Days and Ember Seasons, but a good deal less about Prophecy and Miracles.

The curious phenomenon of a Bishop (Dr. Potter of New York) recently misquoting one of the most familiar of our Lord's sayings in an elaborate essay corrected for the press, is a significant and not too cheering sign of the times.* It should not cause us to neglect our Prayer books, but to give most careful study to our Bibles in preparation for the Sunday School. We do not believe that, on the Evangelical side, there is any ground for the accusation that we relegate the Prayer book to the background. Believing, as we do, that under Providence our Church was guided at the Reformation to make a wise selection of what was truly Scriptural in the older service-books adding to them and arranging them with that sanctified common sense which is her distinguishing characteristic, we will never give up this precious possession. There may be room for future simplification, for the elucidation of ambiguous phrases, but *in substance*, the Prayer book will stand and fall with the Church herself.

Such attacks upon her services as have been unfortunately

*Curiously enough, Bishop Potter's statement that the Jews would not draw an ox or an ass out of a pit on the Sabbath day, might be supported by a passage in the Talmud (*Gemara*, Schabb. 128, 2), but he refers in his foot-note not to this doubtful authority, but to Luke xiv. 5, apparently without verifying his quotation.