

"Enter not into judgment with thy servant, O Lord; for in thy sight shall no man living be justified." There are some to cheer the heart of the contrite, of which the exclamation of the Psalmist, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise," is a specimen; and lastly, there is a solemn warning to the formal, not to imagine the insincere expression of external sorrow acceptable to the Lord—"Rend your heart and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God."

An affectionate address succeeds, pressing on the congregation the importance of confession of sin, putting it on scripture grounds, and urging, that though "at all times" we should "humbly acknowledge" our transgressions, yet surely that it is especially incumbent on us "so to do," when gathered to the public service of the Lord, whom we thank for his mercies, magnify for his glory, petition for his gifts, and listen to in his word. Thus you see, brethren, the church treats you as sinners; she does not except any of her sons from the obligation of continual confession, or admit any excuse of worthiness. And therefore, if there be one of you who, in the pride of his heart, esteems himself righteous, that man does virtually unchurch himself, and burst from the pale of those whom Christ washes and sanctifies, inasmuch as he "came to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance." The exhortation further describes the kind of confession with which we should approach the mercy-seat: it is not the mere repetition of the purport words that is accepted; it is not even sorrow for past transgressions, if we are careless of running into fresh ones: it is with a "lowly, penitent, and obedient heart," we must draw near, if we desire the favour of that "high and lofty One," who dwelleth "with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit." Let this rebuke those of you, who regard the confession as a thing of course, and who rush into the presence of the Lord with a proud unsoftened heart. Take the publican for your model, who, trembling at his own vileness, and with a heavy sense of guilt in his transgressions, uttered the affecting cry, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." "I tell you," (says our Saviour, contrasting his behaviour with that of the formal Pharisee) this man went down to his house, justified rather than the other." The minister, having thus urged the necessity, and described the nature of confession, invites the congregation to attend him to the throne of him who despises not a broken heart.

And while making our confession, the Church admonishes us to kneel; not as though she imagines there is any merit in one particular posture, but because that is the gesture and befitting token of humility, and because we find that eminent saints have generally used it. Thus Solomon, at the consecration of the temple, "kneeling down upon his knees." When Paul bade farewell to the Ephesian Church, "he kneeled down and prayed." And, to refer to but one more example, when our Saviour in his agony, withdrew from his disciples, "he kneeled down, and prayed." Let no man therefore accuse us of superstition in our gestures. We stand, during the sentences and exhortation, because we then listen to God's voice pointedly and personally addressing us; we kneel, when we ask mercy at his hands, because we are guilty suppliants, not worthy of the least of all his mercies.

The confession is an affecting acknowledgement of our demerits. I know not what words could express in stronger language, the sinfulness and misery of man. "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us." Is it not precisely the acknowledgement of the prophet, "the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint: from the sole of the foot even unto the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores?" I am amazed, that any one, after uttering such words, can dare to justify himself, or to extenuate his guilt. Brethren, the Church brings you into this dilemma—either you are the "miserable sinners" you profess to be, or you have now come before God with a lie in your right hand, and have insulted the Highest with an awful mockery. O if there be a self-righteous man before me, a man that would excuse his sins, a man that would persuade himself there is much that is good

and virtuous in him, I do most earnestly entreat that man to beware, lest out of his own mouth he be condemned. The concluding part of the general confession is a deprecation of punishment, and supplication for forgiveness. And it is observable, that here there is no claim advanced, but simply God's promise in Jesus Christ; that is all the plea which a sinner can employ, and, blessed be the kindness of our heavenly Father, it is a plea that shall not fail.

At the close of this prayer, as of all others, the congregation are instructed to respond Amen, signifying their hearty concurrence in what has been uttered, and their earnest desire that God would hear their cry. From St. Paul we learn, that, in the apostolic age, the people "said Amen at the giving of thanks," and the fathers testify, that the practice was continued in succeeding ages. And such was the earnestness with which the people set their seal on the prayers recited by the minister, that, as St. Jerome informs us, the voice of the congregation thus responding, in his time, was loud as a peal of thunder. If we do not desire that this practice should be revived in its full extent, we cannot but wish that each individual would, by the solemn pronouncement of this word, shew that he does not conceive himself an unconcerned auditor.

I will not dwell longer on this division of my subject, than just to ask you, as candid and reflecting persons, whether the view I endeavoured at the outset to give you of human corruption, be not fully borne out by our authorised formularies? Let no man go about to brand this doctrine with the name of novelty: it is that for which our fathers struggled, and which they have embalmed to future ages. So long as the Church of England stands, she will raise her warning voice, that man is fallen, lost, destitute of righteousness: "Thou hast destroyed thyself; in God alone is thine help."

II. Let us turn our attention, in the next place, to the assurance of pardon: "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

We are not to imagine that confession or repentance, be it never so genuine, has any power to sheathe the sword of justice: but "God," in mercy to our race, "was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." The Son of God undertook to offer a sacrifice, full, perfect, and sufficient, for the sins of the world; and the Father covenanted with him, to reward him for this his meritorious humiliation, by delivering from death and condemnation those that should believe in him. When two persons enter into a contract, and one hath performed his part, the other is bound, in all justice and equity, to fulfil his stipulated conditions too; and thus it is that God is "just" in our forgiveness. Christ hath a claim upon him, he has paid the price, and therefore has a right to the inheritance. Let us, however, bear in mind the important distinction, that our pardon, though justice to Christ, is mere sovereign mercy to us. We have no claim but what Christ makes for us, no hope but that which is revealed in Christ, no promise but those which "in him are yea, and in him amen." And therefore we are not to bring money in our hand for the blessing of the gospel, indeed, we have none to bring,—but freely, "without money and without price," they are bestowed on sinners. Not that every man, be his life, and conduct, and affections, what they may, will be saved by Christ; he only, that "with the heart believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth maketh confession unto salvation." He only hath part and lot in the gospel covenant. It is faith, his gift, that unites us to Christ, that faith which worketh by love, the evidence and fruit of which are good works and a holy conversation.

This faith, God generates and strengthens by means of his revealed word: "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The gospel is calculated to dispel all doubt and despondency, to "bind up the broken-hearted, and to proclaim liberty to the captive." Its constant message is—"if thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." The law was made to wound, and the gospel to heal: the law, by its terrors, urges men to flee to gospel grace, and the gospel willingly receives them, and shews them that in Christ there is glorious salvation. This is what our Saviour himself declared, "him that cometh to me, I will in no wise

cast out:" this is what he commanded his disciples to proclaim,— "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature,"—"repentance and remission of sins," in my name;—and yet more solemnly, "whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

This "power of the keys," as it has been termed, has given rise to numberless controversies, chiefly on account of the unwarrantable pretensions therefrom advanced by the Romish church, as though the priest were exalted into the place of God and might forgive or not, at his pleasure. The truth is very simple: the power of the keys (that, at least, we are now referring to, for there is another, relating to church censures,) is exercised in the ministry of the word; we bind, when we declare God's vengeance against sin,—we loose, when we proclaim the full and free forgiveness that is in Jesus Christ. And therefore, no absolution that we are authorized to pronounce, hath power as the Papists say, "really to take away sin," but, as our church has ever held, it is only declaratory, intended to "ascertain us of God's most gracious and merciful pardon." He that hears the minister proclaim salvation, ought to believe his message; but it is not the minister, but God, who for Christ's sake, forgives.

This is what is designed to be conveyed by the absolution, which the priest alone is to pronounce, standing, as the ambassador of God, representing his person: while the people are to listen to it kneeling, as it is fitting that in the same suppliant posture in which they asked forgiveness, they should hear, as it were from the mouth of God, "transgression forgiven, sin covered." The kindness of him who "Willeth not the death of a sinner," is here strikingly depicted: for the joyful annunciation is made, that "he pardoneth all them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel."—Brethren, when you hear this happy news, receive it: "Be not faithless, but believing."—To this declaration there is properly appended an exhortation to ask for "true repentance and his Holy Spirit," that being bought with a precious price, we may glorify him with our bodies and in our spirits which are his. Let no one who desires not, whatsoever he does, to do all to the glory of God, imagine that the mere repetition of this form has put away his sins. It is to the penitent, that the message comes, it is the heart-broken transgressor, it is intended to comfort—"Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee:" and he "to whom much is forgiven," will certainly give evidence in his conduct, that "he loveth much."

We then approach our heavenly Father in the words of that most divine prayer which Christ has committed, as a precious legacy, to his church. Concise, yet comprehensive, it includes petitions for all that we can need. Four verses succeed, in which we ask God to quicken our devotions and to raise our hearts to him, while with joyful lips we speak his praises: we are thus prepared to magnify him in "psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs;" but the consideration of these must be reserved for another discourse.

I make two very brief observations in conclusion.

1. There is no man so righteous, but that he is a miserable sinner. "If we say we have not sinned," (says the apostle) we make God a liar, and his word is not in us." * * * Strive to attain a clear view of this first great principle of the oracles of God; and rest assured that you have not a clear and proper view of it, till you are roused, individually and personally, to ask the anxious question, "What shall I do to be saved?"

2. Lastly, There is no man so sinful, but that Christ can pardon him. For this very purpose he suffered, that he might make atonement for transgression: for this very purpose he was exalted, that he might be "a merciful High Priest, able to have compassion." In the visions of the ancient seers, it was foretold that help should be laid on "One mighty" to save even to the uttermost; and he has abundantly already given proof of this power. Can you fix your eyes on the assemblage of "just men made perfect?" The nearest to the throne, are Saul the persecutor and blasphemer, and Peter the apostate: the blood that washed them clean, can now cleanse you. Then, I say, make trial of his love: make instant trial; tempt him no longer by unbelief. He invites you to draw near; the same voice proclaim his church, "the pillar of the