

SURSUM CORDA

Thanksgiving Sermon by Rev. W. T. HALLAM, D.D.,
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*Lift up your hearts,
We lift them up unto the Lord.*

THROUGH hundreds of years these words have voiced the aspiration and assurance of Christian believers. Cyprian, in the third century and Cyril, of Jerusalem, in the fourth, speak of the Church using this versicle and response in exactly the same form. To them it had been handed down from former generations. For our thanksgiving in the present distress nothing can better express our realized need of God and our confidence in His sure deliverance than these words hallowed by long use. We must lift up our hearts above the present turmoil. We must get a clear vision of things. Only that will give us the courage to meet and the mind to interpret the things which are about us. To God alone we can lift up our hearts. In Him and in the sureness of His mercy we find our steadfast strength. It seems strange to speak of giving thanks at this time, when the evidences of man's sin and hate are so plain. But in God we have our certain hope and abundant ground for thanksgiving. He is our strong rock of defence. This is the true note of thanksgiving.

Some of us remember a type of thanksgiving sermon in which we were told to thank God for the greatness of the land which He had given us. We were feasted in prodigal fashion upon statistics about the height of our mountains, the length of our rivers, and the extent of our railways. A nation that dwelt in so great a land must be great. This was what even our public orators never tired of telling us, whenever they took a rest from exhorting us to give thanks to their own political party for the same material advantages. But we have learned that nations, like men, are not judged by the size of their dwelling-places; some men of great soul live in small houses and some men of mean soul dwell in mansions. There is a nation with a land so large that it would make eighteen Germanys, but its official soul is so small that in going through the eye of a needle it would lose its way. Little Belgium has taught us once more that the greatness of a nation is not measured by its domain.

There is a possibility of the very extent of a land being a hindrance to the development of true citizenship. We have mountains of splendid aspect, boundless forests, inexhaustible fisheries and mines, and prairies, as wide as the open sea. But some men there are who from afar can gaze upon the snow-capped peaks, climbing on the shoulders of the foothills and never think of the sublime. Some can gaze on the swelling prairies and never think of the bountifulness of God. Some walk through the lofty aisles of a forest cathedral and think only of the number of feet of lumber in it. The very greatness of the land seems to starve some men's souls. "He gave them their hearts' desire but sent leanness withal into their souls." It is a sad thing when the biggest thing about a nation is the extent and richness of its territory. True citizens are those who live in sight of the spiritual meaning of it all.

We are thankful for our land, not because it is great but because of what its greatness may enable us to do. We are not thinking of the possibility of personal wealth and ease for which some men would exploit the very vastness of the land. But we are thinking of the possibility of developing a citizenship here which by God's help shall come nearer to the ideals of love and liberty which the Master announced. Imagine what it would mean if on every side within three hundred miles from where we live there were the frowning frontiers of hostile powers looking with greed upon our small possessions! As it is we can journey day and night for a week and scarcely travel from shore to shore of our Dominion. Within this area we are free to build up a national life as we wish. With our resources it becomes not merely a possibility but a privilege and heavy responsibility to foster a nation which shall embody the best of British traditions.

THAT WE ARE BRITISH.

We ought to thank God for the best of British traditions. Never was I so proud of the name

British, as when recently I was listening to a military man recounting the experiences of a British soldier who had been with the Russians. He had seen what the Prussians had done on the eastern front. Their actions exposed the lie, made in Germany, for American consumption, that the men who did such unspeakable things in Belgium were the sweepings of the German gaols placed first in the assault to save better men. The first-line Prussian regiments on the Eastern front were as brutish in their treatment of women and children as the gaol sweepings in Belgium. From history we learn that this is not an isolated case. Forty years ago the Germans in France made their name abhorred. We do not forget the Kaiser's exhortation to his troops going to China, that they should make their name to be dreaded like the Huns of Attila. One hundred years ago when Prussian and English fighting side by side, defeated the Kaiser of the age. The Prussians looked forward to the sack of Paris. But Wellington declared that the English bayonets would be turned against the first Prussians attempting it.

Some tell us that the untoward conditions in the trenches, where life is in the rough, has ruined the moral stamina of our men, and when they get into German territory, to their disgrace will be placed crimes as despicable as those we abhor in our enemy. But many a man has found God out there in life in the rough. The British soldier is not perfect, but thank God no such disgrace is the record of the British. In this war the one fact which has made the greatest appeal is murdered Belgium. The motives of rescue and self-protection have made an irresistible combination. Men whose traditions are "Help the defenceless," and "Women and children first," will not lose their manhood at the sight of helplessness. Their letters home do not betray such a spirit. We cast the lie back into the teeth of those who so defame our fathers, our brothers, and our sons. The true spirit of our men we take it is expressed in those lines written 20 years ago, which were found in the Testament of a New Zealand soldier who had given his life in Gallipoli:—

Jesus, Whose lot with us was cast,
Who saw it out from first to last,
Would I could win and keep and feel
That heart of love, that spirit of steel!

Do Thou but keep me hope or none,
Cheery and staunch till all is done,
And, at the last gasp, quick to lend
One effort more to save a friend.

So for such traditions we thank God, not with the smug satisfaction of a hypocrite, but because we realize more deeply than others our failures in deed and disposition in the sight of the great Ideal. Nor do we say that we alone are striving to do God's will. But it would be worse than hypocrisy to pretend that we were not thankful and proud of being British.

THAT WE ARE CHRISTIAN.

We thank God, not only that we are British but, for a larger term, that we are Christian. The best in the term "British" is drawn from "Christian." Whatever is in "British" that is contrary to "Christian" is worthy only of the scorn of men. For what Jesus Christ means to us as Saviour, Friend and Master, we offer unfeigned thanks. And as in the journey of life we realize more and more the gift of sins forgiven, and the power of His guidance and inspiration in victorious living and increasing service, our gratitude grows deeper and stronger. To take from our life all that Christ means to us would leave us poor indeed. He has given to life its fulness. Without Him life has no meaning. Only as our nation is moulded by His spirit, will it have a greatness that is true and lasting.

"We thank thee, O God, for thy great glory." What has God's great glory to do with our little lives limited in scope and powers? His great glory is the very basis of our lives. The glorious perfections of His moral excellences are the foundations of our world. During the last two

years we have seen the violation of truth and honour among the powers of the world. We remember with what dumb amazement we looked upon Germany, not only breaking her pledges, but flaunting her broken pledges in the face of God Himself. We remember how we stood aghast at the black treachery of some of our own citizens who strove to make wealth at the expense of the very life of our soldiers. The foundations of the world seemed out of course. Everything which we had held sacred and inviolate had been violated. In the midst of it all He is the One who changeth not. "With Him is no variability of the turning of the shadow." God alone and His great glory is the sure foundation. When the heart cries out in the pain of its sudden grief, we cry to Him alone. When the message that we dread has come, "Wounded," "killed," or that cruel "Missing," the word on our lips is "God," "Father." To Him alone we can turn. He has never failed or deserted. We thank Him for His great glory.

We remember, also, the way in which He has led us these fifty years as a nation. We thank Him for all; for prosperity, in which He has blessed us; and for hardship in which He has rescued us from the torpor of satisfaction. As a nation we can thank Him for the dark days through which we are passing. We can see the outbreak of war two years ago as one of His messengers. For like a lightning flash it revealed the terrible chasm towards which the nations were going in an easy descent.

It is easy to speak in terms of a nation. It is so impersonal. It does not touch us. But can we thank God for the dark days which have come to us as individuals? Many a heart has been numbed by grief since the war broke out. Anxious hearts have poured out their prayers with trembling lips for loved ones. Thousands have been living on the edge of things and some have looked over the edge. We think this morning of one district where the autumn sunshine does not fall upon pleasant field and forest, touching with a new glory the scarlet-tinged woods. It falls on the ruins of homesteads and charred and blackened ground, with here and there the fresh earth of new graves showing like unhealed wounds. Could you thank God if home and loved ones had been swept away in those dreadful days? Does God expect men to thank Him for dark days?

FOR DARK DAYS.

Dark days will come. Gladness, hope and beauty have their place. We love the bursting flowers and sweet faces of children. We clutch at these things to hold them with clinging grasp. But we forget that nothing is written more plainly on the face of this world than that life to the fulness is found, not in continual indulgence, but in stint and hardship. The master powers in character building wear no smiling aspect. There is work and fight and trial. Without some part of these a man never comes to man's estate.

All about us is lying the shadowed realm of trouble. To men and women whose sky is without a cloud there comes the uneasy sighing in the tree tops, warning of the coming storm. In sympathy and love we walk with our friends in these shadows as far as we can, but the wine-press must be trodden alone. That shadowed realm is the region of great exploits. Self-control, patience and tenderness are learned in those shadows. We watch the man struck down with sudden calamity, forced to watch the shadow creeping on while life to him becomes a sad remembrance of lights gone out; that we see how he strives to keep his face toward the morning. We see women reduced from affluence to poverty and a new, unflagging energy surprises them and us. Most of the dwellers in the shadowed land have the unfailing smile to the coming friend. They would ease the burden which presses so heavily on those about them. In many a life after the urgency of the trouble has passed, there comes a new sympathy and gentleness. They remember those that are in trouble and speak softly to the sorrowing ones. But it is sad to see some learn nothing from their grief. They have an enduring drought of heart. When we, in our turn, pass through the shadowed realm, may we learn the lessons God would have us learn and come out deeper, stronger and kindlier.

But does God expect us to thank Him for these dark days? Yes, after they are long past. But for the present, "Thy will be done," a life's task taken up again with a new vision, a clearing of view, so that we have a sight of the things that matter most, God's eternities, these are the best thanksgiving. Some day, when at the last we know as we are known and see Him face to face, we shall thank Him for the dark days too.