

FIVE MINUTE SERMON

By Rev. N. M. Desmond
FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE BAPTISM OF PENANCE

"And he came into all the country about the Jordan, preaching the baptism of penance, (Luc. 36.)"

The herald appointed by God to precede His Divine Son, to prepare the hearts of the Jewish people for His coming, St. John the Baptist, had, as we read in this day's gospel, one burden for his discourses. The sum and substance of his preaching is summed up in the description given of it in the words, "the baptism of penance." The one great preparation, then, which the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of the Baptist, proclaims as necessary to us, in order to dispose our souls for the coming of God's Kingdom is penance. He calls it a baptism because of its efficiency in our sanctification. For, as the sacrament of baptism cleanses our souls from all stain of original sin, so does penance wipe out all the sins which, through frailty and not verities of heart, we may have committed. And as without baptism no one can enter the kingdom of heaven, so also without true and sincere penance of the soul no sinner can regain the friendship and grace of God, which alone will obtain for him the rights he has forfeited by sin. Now, we are all sinners. The few who have never lost their baptismal innocence are as small in number as the leaves in winter; we, the many who have sinned, are as numerous as the buds in spring. We must, therefore, in order to prepare the way of God in our hearts, make use of the sole remedy appointed by God for that purpose. That remedy is true and sincere conversion of the heart and soul and mind from our evil ways. It alone will restore to us what we have lost through our evil deeds. Let us then try and understand its full meaning and significance.

The repentance which availeth to salvation, is, in the first place, a purely gratuitous gift of God. It is a mercy purchased by the precious blood of Christ Jesus. It is a grace which can only come from above. It must, therefore, be earnestly asked for and anxiously sought after. We must frequently and with all earnestness petition for it. Prayer, long continued and from the heart, is our sole means of bringing it to our souls. We must, as it were, seek to obtain it by doing violence to the heavenly throne by our importunity. All times and seasons are alike useful for this purpose, but these days of Advent are especially available for it. The present is a time of salvation. Let then a strong, earnest cry of persevering prayer go up from our hearts in these precious days of grace. Let it not cease until we feel an outpouring of the Holy Spirit filling our souls, and an intense feeling of sorrow welling up in our interior man. This will manifest itself to us by a thorough change in our whole being. For this is what true penance, the penance which winneth salvation, will do for us. It will take from us the old spirit of attachment to sin, and place instead of it, a new spirit of compunction and resolution. It will remove from our eyes the veil of blindness which kept from our vision the awful danger of our evil state. It will inspire our hearts with a holy fear, the beginning of wisdom, of the terrible judgments of the Most High, which are ever impending over the heads of unhappy sinners. It will change us at once and completely from sin and incontinence to God. It will enable us to turn our backs on the way which leads to perdition, and place our feet in the straight road which leads Zionward. Our disposition, hitherto inclined to evil, will now give place to inclinations tending to good. In a word, our whole hearts will be transformed, as it is written, "I will put a new spirit into my people." This new spirit will manifest itself in our lives, and become evident in our works. It will direct our desires and rule all our actions. It will make of us new men created in the justice and holiness of truth. Our past will become a source of aversion and dislike, and we will resolve to make amends by our future conduct for its many and grievous shortcomings. In a word, we will leave forever the ranks of Satan and sin, and take our place under the standard of Jesus and grace. This is what real repentance will effect for us. Any other penance than this will not profit us to eternal life.

This is the baptism of penance preached by John, the fitting and only preparation for the coming of the kingdom of heaven into our hearts. It is emphatically our pressing and serious duty at this holy time to endeavor to perform it. Let us resolve earnestly to do it. Let the voice, crying in the wilderness, find an answering echo in our souls. "To-day if you shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts." Let us be not like to the prevaricators of old, who listened not to God's voice, lest for us, as for them, the time of God's exasperation may come suddenly; and upon us, as upon them, may fall the dread punishment, ever visited by God on those who hearken not to His call in the day of His grace, a hardened heart and an unrepentant spirit, sure forerunners of the judgment without mercy which awaits those who die in sin and enmity with their Creator.

When the afflictions of this life overcome us, let us encourage ourselves to bear them patiently by the hope of heaven.—St. Alphonsus.

TEMPERANCE

"THE WHISKY SWAMP"

Some time ago there appeared in a New York paper a huge editorial, entitled "The Whisky Swamp." Here are some paragraphs from it: "Into that swamp millions have wandered, and in it millions have died. There is no other shore to the whisky swamp. The middle of that swamp is failure and disgrace, and the other side is death. It takes courage and it takes will to turn back. And courage and will are the things that whisky attacks and first destroys. "This will not hurt you," says whisky, and lights the light of hope a little farther on in the swamp, and the victim flounders on farther and deeper. "You are a man of strong will," says whisky, "and can control yourself and stop when you please." "I know I can," says the whisky drinker, and drinks again, and the mud of the swamp rises a little higher upon him.—Sacred Heart Review.

DANGERS OF LIQUOR TRAFFIC

"Consider that a large percentage of the people, especially in the ranks of youth, are too weak of themselves to resist successfully the allurements of the saloon, and really need the protection afforded by prohibitory enactment. Consider, moreover, the financial waste resulting from the traffic in strong drink, which is simply enormous. And what is much worse the appalling catalogue of crimes which may be traced, directly or indirectly, to the drink evil; the wrecked homes, the ruined families, the withered and blasted careers, the havoc of all that is best and sweetest in human life wrought by the monster of intemperance. 'To drunkenness,' says the Archbishop and Bishops of Ireland in a joint pastoral address to their people some years ago, 'To drunkenness we may refer, as to its baneful cause, almost all of the crime by which the country is disgraced, and much of the poverty from which it suffers. Drunkenness has wrecked more homes, once happy, than ever fell beneath the crowbar in the worst days of eviction; it has filled more graves and made more widows and orphans than did the famine; it has broken more hearts, blighted more hopes, and rent asunder family ties more ruthlessly than the enforced exile to which their misery has condemned emigrants. Against evil so widespread and so pernicious we implore all who have at heart the honor of God and the salvation of souls to be filled with holy zeal.'—True Voice.

ROME AND HOME

By E. H. in the Lamp

Such is the title of an essay written by Bishop Mott Williams, of Marquette, for a recent number of the Living Church. Its purpose is evidently to advise Anglicans with troubled consciences not to leave their home—the Episcopal Church—in exchange for the doubtful advantages that they may think to gain in "Rome." The writer discusses the experiences of three people in whom he is interested. They are Robert Hugh Benson, Edmund Ffoulkes and Dr. Miel.

The first represents the convert to Rome who stays there, the second the convert who goes there, but eventually returns, and the third is the Catholic priest who renounces his priesthood, but who ultimately drifts into Anglicanism. The comparison made between the wanderings of these three men is very fair, and the conclusion reached by Bishop Williams is as interesting to us as it will no doubt be to the readers of the Living Church. It is pointed out very clearly that everything depends upon the goal that we are in search of. Respite finem."

Bishop Williams naturally ranges himself on the side of Ffoulkes and Miel, although he is very kind in his reference to Benson. He admits that in company with the former, he is above all else desirous of finding a comfortable "Church Home," where a man can follow his own line of thinking without restriction and yet at the same time share in the advantages of a well-equipped organization. In distinction to this he places the mental attitude of Benson, who is only seeking for the True Church, quite regardless of consequences. This does not mean that the others are to be convicted of dishonesty, but that they are quite of the opinion that there is no such thing as a true Church, strictly speaking. This may appear to be a rather startling admission to appear in the pages of a High Church paper. That it is a fair statement of the case will be seen as we proceed.

THE CASE OF BENSON

Bishop Williams has read Hugh Benson's "Confession of a Convert." He sums up its contents very fairly. He ignores the old explanation about the "glamour of Rome" and admits that Benson had exactly calculated the price of his submission. That he was well aware that he would have difficulties; but being convinced that the True Church must exist, he could only find one Church that answered to its description.

"Rome must be that Church, so all the rest did not matter. Abuses were, on the whole, inevitable. But he must go to the True Church." Benson was surely following the Divine precept. "Seek ye, therefore, first, the Kingdom of God."

THE CASE OF DR. MIEL

Dr. Miel is described very carefully as a man who had practically lost his faith. Those who read his book, "A Soul's Pilgrimage," will not be able to discover very clearly how this happened. It seems that some one suggested to him that the authorities that he had quoted in some pamphlets in defence of Catholicism were not authentic or accurate. This seems to have completely disturbed his convictions and from thence on his faith waned. A visit to the city of Rome in the days of the Temporal Power only confirmed his doubts and he eventually renounced his priesthood and entered the married state. In a word, the arguments from antiquity that convinced Benson of the Truth of Catholicism is claimed to have destroyed his belief in it. It would be interesting to know what were the discoveries that he made which he deemed so conclusive.

The writer of this article read his book some years ago, and remembers to have remarked at the time that Dr. Miel must have made a very superficial investigation of the matter which so greatly changed his life. He seems to have accepted all the long-since exploded fables about the forged decretals. After leaving the Roman Church he became "closely allied to unorthodox friends." After a long period had passed he came in contact with Anglicanism in California, where he was teaching. "He allowed himself," so says Bishop Williams, "to listen to Bishop Kip, and resumed the exercise of his priesthood, this time in our own Church." His diary records his impressions of Anglicanism. "If there is a true Church on earth, it is probably the Church of England."

Our readers will not fail to compare this faltering profession of opinion with the enthusiasm of Benson. It is hard to call his accession to the Episcopal Church a conversion. Dr. Miel simply found a comfortable corner for himself and family. He eventually settled in Philadelphia, where he died as rector of the French Protestant Church of Saint Sauveur. His congregation consisted of those who wished to brush up their French by listening to his sermons. The High Church clergy of Philadelphia felt that they had to apologize for his presence. Certainly they never regarded his experiences as in any way an argument for the Catholicity of Anglicanism.

THE CASE OF FFOULKES

This is a rather similar case. It is remarkable how far afield Bishop Williams has to go for illustrations. Both Ffoulkes and Miel belong to a distant past. Neither of them ever contributed anything of importance to either Catholicism or Anglicanism. Ffoulkes's notoriety is mainly the result of his writing a book, "Reasons for Returning to the Church of England."

Here we have another man who has distinctly lost his faith in any Church. He tells us so exactly. About the time of Newman's conversion he had "gone over to Rome" with many others. After mature consideration he discovered that he had accepted the "infallibility of the Roman Church" without recognizing the full logical force of the idea. He found that he really believed that the truth of Christianity itself only rested "upon a high degree of probability." Naturally he felt quite out of place as a Catholic priest, and after a period in which he ceased to have any active connection with the Church, he chose the occasion of the Vatican Council's pronouncement of Papal Infallibility to completely sever his relations with Catholicism.

In associating himself once more with Anglicanism, he leaves us under no misapprehensions as to the terms of his affiliation. He has not returned to the true Church, for there is no true Church. Here are his words quoted by Bishop Williams:

"It is useless as well as childish to shut one's eyes, and to pretend that in this or that existing community the teaching of the great Master finds its faultless living embodiment. Everything is in confusion. . . . In the midst of this confusion it is not to be doubted that the Church of England, which is the very embodiment of the idea of Christian dissensions, has proved itself a working institution on an immense scale."

In other words, Ffoulkes found a Church Home for himself and a niche where he could believe what he liked and choose what he preferred. His decision seems to be that if there is a true Church it will probably be the one in which there is the most confusion!

THE CASE OF BISHOP WILLIAMS

We said that Bishop Williams identifies himself with the sentiments of Miel and Ffoulkes. He does this implicitly by writing the article and giving it its title. But he also expressly asserts the same convictions as they do. He calmly and deliberately confesses "I have never believed in the infallibility of the Church myself."

There was a time when such an expression of belief could not have found publicity in a High Church journal. Surely the doctrine of the infallibility of the Church was the very foundation principle of the teaching of the Oxford Fathers and before them of the historical High Church party. Imagine the fury of Dr. Pusey, did his eyes alight upon such a betrayal of essential truth! And this from a Bishop who has been known to wear a cope and mitre, and who has always associated himself with "Catholic views." Let us wait a minute before we condemn him.

His words sound brutally harsh, but perhaps he does not mean to depart from the High Church position after all. He has not declared his disbelief in the infallibility of the Church without a qualification. In his next sentence he says: "I have believed in its infallibility." He disowns the word "infallibility," he admits the term "indefectibility." Whether such a distinction is possible in the concrete we will discuss later. It is at least evident that in the abstract he is trying to meet a difficulty.

After all, when High Churchmen refer to the "Catholic Church" they are speaking of a purely subjective thing which does not exist in reality. Bishop Williams in common with them would probably argue that the Church is only One in an invisible sense. In practice it consists of a number of mutually antagonistic Churches. When they speak of this ideal Church, whose "unity" is only known to God, they are certainly accustomed to claim that it is infallible. Rome is not infallible, Canterbury is not infallible, neither is Moscow, but the Church is.

Now, it has ever been a difficulty to know how a divided Church can teach with an infallible voice. Bishop Williams sweeps aside the difficulty by denying that it is infallible at all. It is indefectible, however. In what way? By its possession of Apostolic succession, a matter that is capable of ocular proof. It is the old branch theory again with its insistence upon Apostolic Succession as the only proof of the standing or falling of the Church. Where you have Bishops there you have the Church, because the succession of the Episcopal order is the only essential and visible proof of the permanence of Christianity. It has never failed in the past, it will never fail in the future. Let heresy come, let schism come, it matters not, for the Church is not infallible in doctrine, the succession of its Bishops is the single source of its vitality!

True, no ordinary High Churchman would confess this with his lips, but it is not the inevitable result of the Branch Theory? What is the use of complaining about false doctrine, when the existence of at least three conflicting "Apostolic" Churches proclaims that at least two of them must in some way be wrong? Bishop Williams has found an ingenious way of ridding his mind of this difficulty. He is not going to bother about the confusion that exists amongst Anglicans in matters of faith, for it is the necessary result of the Church being fallible. He will hold on to the Episcopate in which our Lord made promises of permanence, and he will worry along as best he can in the matter of doctrinal standards. One must admit that his position is a very ingenious one, and we are tempted to believe that he has been keen enough to formulate a principle that most of his High Church conferees really act upon without knowing it.

In a highly abstract way there may be something to be said for Bishop Williams's position. A man who holds it can sit back in his chair and thank God that he has a broad mind. He can also feel a certain sense of pride in belonging to an historic institution dating back to the time of the Apostles. He can do good work in preaching and teaching. He can get great comfort from the beautiful services of the Prayer Book. He can live and end his days as a respected and devoted pastor and friend.

But what if he happens to believe in a True Church? Will this formula of a fallible, indefectible Church carry him through? Will his conscience be set at rest by it? Can such a Church exist in the concrete? How can a Church be indefectible without at the same time being infallible? Let us see if Bishop Williams's theory is workable. First let us try to define our terms in the sense that he uses them.

By infallibility we think that he means the power to teach the revealed truth of God without fear of error.

By indefectibility we think that he means that attribute of the Church that ensures its permanent identity to the end of time. Now, the identity of any body depends upon its possessing certain necessary qualities without any essential change. If these qualities do suffer change then the identity is destroyed. One of the qualities of the Church is the power to preach the word of God. Surely so, for this is the express commission received from the Lord. Yet, if we admit this to be true we will eventually come back to infallibility. For unless the Church preaches the word of God infallibly, she will either contradict herself in the course of time or else introduce false doctrines. When she does this she destroys her identity, for one of her essential qualities has been lost. In a word, she is no longer preaching the word of God. Her authority, infallibility and indefectibility are inseparably connected. Where is the escape from this dilemma? Bishop Williams attempts to provide such an escape, and in doing so he is only following High Church practice. He limits the essential qualities of the Church to the sole possession of the Episcopate. If this argument were carried to its logical conclusion it would be possible to have a Church presided over by the Apostles, and yet preaching Mohammedanism instead of Christianity. The power to define truth, and to define it infallibly, must come in somewhere to save such a possible situation.

Still further. The episcopate is not bestowed by a mere touch of the hand. That touch must be definitely limited to a specific end, otherwise every Episcopal blessing would bestow Holy Orders. There must be a "form." Now, the moment you admit the need of a form in ordination, you at once postulate the need of a fixed belief. You must believe that the Episcopate means some one definite thing. Nowadays we have all kinds of Bishops. Methodist Bishops, Mormon Bishops, etc. Is the mere word Bishop a positive title to a positive office? By no means. Back of the word must be belief. And unless this belief is infallibly true, you have no certainty that there will be identity. It is impossible to remove the quality of infallibility from any idea of a permanent Church. Bishop Williams has had the courage to write down very plainly the most powerful argument for remaining an Anglican. Stay where you are because you will be more "at home" in an environment in which you were born. We feel sure, however, that his presentment of this argument will not bring any peace of soul to those who have conscientious difficulties. Few of these whose minds are in confusion will be satisfied with the argument that those who are confused should be satisfied to remain in a Church where every thing is admittedly confused.

CHRIST'S REPRESENTATIVE

There was a certain Christian man who always said grace before the meal, using the familiar words: "Be present at our table, Lord, Be here and everywhere adored."

One day his little boy said, "Papa, you always ask Jesus Christ to come and be present at our table, but He never does come." His father said, "Wait and see." That very day while at dinner, a knock was heard at the door. A poor man stood there who said, "I am starving; I am very poor and miserable. I think God loves me and I love God, but I am very hungry and miserable and cold." The gentleman said, "Come in, come and sit down, and have a bit of our dinner." The little boy said, "You may have all my helping." So he gave him all his helping and the poor man had a good meal. After the stranger had gone the father said to his son, "Didn't Jesus come? You said He never came. There was that poor man, and Christ said, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, My brethren, ye have done it unto Me." Christ sends His representatives. What you have done to that poor man is the same as if you had done it to Christ.—Catholic News.

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