

THE GRACE OF CHARITY.

A SERMON BY THE LATE THOMAS GUTHRIE, D.D.

"Now abideth charity: the greatest of these is charity." 1 Cor. xiii. 13.

IN the first place, let us consider what we are to understand by charity.

It is an old word for love, that inner fountain of which kindness to the poor is but one of many streams; and where, when neither ruffled by passion nor polluted by sin, God, who is love, sees His own face, the reflection of His features, as we see ours on looking into a draw-well. I need not tell you who have been familiar with love from your earliest days what it is. At our birth she received us into her arms and welcomed us into the world. Love is associated with the first face our opening faculties recognised, with the first name our infant lips ever lisped, and with the pure, deep affection of one who pressed us, now-born, to her happy bosom; and nursing us from the fountains of her breast, forgot all the world in the helpless creature cast upon her care. Flowing through the earth like streams amid desert sands, shining in life's darkest nights like stars in a wintry sky, throwing a bright bow over every cloud of fortune—to love, more than to anything else, this world owes what blessedness it enjoys. Life without it would not be worth the having; and without it, though we had a house, and that house a palace, we could not have a home.

Of this tenderest and strongest passion ~~what~~ beautiful illustrations lie, shining like diamonds, in Bible story! In Rizzpah, lone woman, who by seven gibbets guards the bodies of her sons, nor rises by night or day for weeks but to scare away the vulture or front the hungry wolf, love forgets herself—her only care the rotting dead. In Judah, yonder, she pleads for Benjamin, and offers, so he be set at liberty, to wear a brother's bonds. In that wronged though guilty mother, who, on seeing her babe in the hands of the executioner, raises a piercing shriek, and, casting herself at the king's feet, cries, "O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it," love consents to part with her dearest object to save its life. Nay, in David, who, forgetting all Absalom's crimes at the news of his death, bursts into this cry of wildest, deepest grief, "O my son Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" love would buy another's life at the expense of her own. In the graves of the dead she buries all their crimes, and waters with her tears the memory of their virtues. In the garden where Peter sees his Lord betrayed, beset, and ready to be bound, she takes no count of numbers; but casting prudence to the wind, rushes on the foremost foe, striking for her master. In Paul her hand trembles while she writes the doom of the ungodly, her eyes blot the page with tears, and she is willing to be herself accursed from Christ, so that countrymen and kindred are saved. One example more. You have anticipated it, and your thoughts, outrunning my words, have fixed on that amid whose transcendent glory these all are lost—like stars swallowed up in the blaze of day. Love, perfect, divine, hangson the Cross of Calvary; and speaks in Him who, turning an eye of pity on His bloody murderers, cries, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Well may Paul say, "Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."

II. Let us look at some of the features of this grace.

1. Love is a mighty power. Take Paul's description of it. First, It "beareth all things." So I thought, on seeing a woman who presented a blessed and, though clad in rags, a beautiful contrast to those mothers who, committing most revolting murder, lay bloody hands on their new-born babes. To appearance she was one of those homeless creatures who are tossed about our city like the sea wreck that, torn by the rude storm from its native rock, goes floating about the shore, washed in and washed out with each flowing tide. A threadbare shawl fell in scanty folds from her shoulders, and covered something held on her left arm. As, struck by her forlorn aspect, I was watching her movements, she suddenly stopped and raised the shawl. Then, as when a flood of golden sunlight, bursting through a rift in the clouds, and suddenly falling on some field, or hillside, or lake, or village, lightens up the scene, such change came over her face when she turned to earnest gaze on an infant that lay asleep, nestling in her

bosom. You never saw a smile of more ineffable delight than this poor, perhaps guilty creature throw on her helpless charge. It was plain that she would have died for it—true to nature as the bear, who protects her young by offering her shaggy breast to the hunter's spear; and there, where love was turning what others might deem a burden into the one joy and blessing of the outcast's life, I thought of the words, it "beareth all things."

Second, It "believeth all things, hopeth all things." What will not parents bear from their children, and believe and hope of them? Did not Augustine's mother pray twenty long years for his conversion? And what is it but this hope that love breeds which still sustains the arms of praying fathers and mothers? You may quench the hopes of reason, but not those of love. It hopes against hope, and will soar like an eagle, which, rising with the rising tempest, mounts highest in stormy skies. Such hopes sustained the mother whom I saw intently gazing on the stone walls that immured her boy. Opposite the prison gate, raised on the steps whence she could see the windows of the upper cells, her tall form clad in the attire of humble but honest life, and stooping under the burdens of grief and age, she stood, oblivious of all around, while her body went rocking to and fro with that swaying motion which bespeaks the deepest grief. An hour thereafter, rooted to the spot, there still she stood; her eyes, that swam in tears, and were fixed on an iron-barred window, telling as plainly as if her choking words had told it, that within those gloomy walls lay one that had once been cradled in her, happy arms, and to whom, hoping all things, believing all things, her love yet clung, like ivy to a crumbling ruin.

Third, It "endureth all things." "Thus saith the Lord," speaking of His Church, "Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream: then shall ye suck, ye shall be borne upon her sides, and be dandled upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you." What a depth is there in that love which God chooses as an image of His own! and yet the love of a mother's heart is but a drop from that illimitable ocean into which our sins, though great as mountains, once cast are lost for ever—buried out of sight. I believe that His love as far exceeds a mother's, when it is deepest and strongest, as does the strength of His almighty arm that of the infant which hangs helpless on her breast. She may forget a fact which the blood of murdered infants proclaims, as, unheeded by a justice that wears her sword in vain in this guilty land, it cries aloud to heaven for vengeance: "yet," He says, "will I not forget thee. Behold, I have engraven thee upon the palms of my hands."

Now, as it is by His love, seen in the face and form of a dying Saviour, that God melts the stony heart and subdues sinners to Himself, so to this power also, under God, we must trust if we would bend stubborn wills, reclaim the vicious, and save the lost. The voice that grates harshly on the ear, the eye that does not glisten with tears but glares with anger, never made the bad good, or the good better. Men are not to be scolded into the love of God; nor can the terror of hell frighten any into the love of heaven. Who would revive dead souls, let him learn his lesson in the chamber where the prophet, to restore the Shunamite's son, rose from his knees, and took the boy into such loving, close embraces, that the heart of the living beat against the heart of the dead. Deal not with ungodly children, or careless and irreligious friends, without taking care to show that you love the sinners as much at least as you hate their sins. Cultivate true, gentle, Christ-like love. What good may you not do, what stubborn hearts may you not melt, what hatred and hardness may you not subdue by the outgoings and expression of that love which is averse from censure but prone to praise; which pities while it blames; which, unselfish, "seeketh not her own;" which touches wounds with a tender hand; and which, ready to cover a multitude of sins, spake through Him who, purest of the pure, and holiest of the holy, said, as He looked with pity on the guilty woman, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more."

2. Love is the grand principle of the Gospel.

A child had strayed from its mother's side, and, gathering buttercups and daisies, had approached the edge of a precipice. On raising her head what was the mother's horror to see her darling tottering on the dreadful brink! If she cries, alarmed or in gleesome play, he takes another backward step and perishes. With prompt, instinctive wisdom, though with