

# SUNDAY READING

## SERMON.

Strength in Church Work.  
Preached by Rev. F. L. WILSON, D. D., at  
the Mission Church of Saint John Baptist on Saint  
John Baptist's Day, 1892.

And waxed strong in spirit.—St. Luke, i, 80.  
How brief and yet how full is this record  
of your patron saint! It tells us all which  
the Holy Ghost has pleased to write, of  
his boyhood, youth and early manhood.  
Nor can devout fancy add very much to  
the quiet story. Until he was thirty years  
of age, and that great soul, by "his shew-  
ing unto Israel," roused all Jerusalem by  
the fire of his mighty zeal, we only know  
that he tarried "in the desert," that he  
"waxed strong in spirit," biding his time,  
which was God's time; and then the burning  
and shining light flashed forth its blaze as  
the great voice startled the echoes along the  
banks of the Jordan, and men's hearts were  
bowed with the anguish of penitence, and  
men's hopes were quickened at thought of  
the coming King and the glories of His  
Kingdom.

I pause not tonight, beloved, to rehearse  
the familiar tale of the wondrous life, and  
work, and the calm death in the dungeon  
of Machabers, when the grandest man  
whom Almighty God had ever made and  
the greatest prophet whom He had ever  
inspired, laid down his task, so perfectly  
wrought out to its very end. I only ask  
you to think with me about the three  
words—"Strong in spirit," as true of him,  
as demanded of you, as requisite in any  
mission which shall bear his glorious  
name.

It has been often said, and with obvious  
truth, that, in the mystical body, the  
priesthood is the back bone. It has been  
lately said, in sad satire, the more sad if  
just, that carries of the back bone has been  
the disease of the priesthood in some of  
the later generations. With most noble  
exceptions, it may have been true, here  
and there, that the "like people like  
priest" has been a bitter prophecy too  
much fulfilled.

At least, when the priest of God lifts  
clearly before his own gaze, the face, the  
heart, the work of the Baptist, and asks  
"in what am I like him?" he must often  
feel the stinging rebuke, which his own  
weak, in the presence of temptation and  
timidity, and "time-serving," under  
the guise of expediency, so richly merit.  
If he is not "strong in spirit," but  
weak under the manifold pressure of igno-  
rance, and prejudice, and worldliness, and  
restrictions unjustly made and enforced;  
weak, in the presence of temptation and  
timidity, and "time-serving," under  
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weak, in the presence of temptation and  
timidity, and "time-serving," under  
the guise of expediency, so richly merit.

You may pity a priesthood, which has  
lost courage, and vigor, and self-denial,  
but you may grieve, even more, for the  
church which finds such priests at her  
altars.

This service tonight, however, rather  
suggests the question, "what is a strong  
mission?" The readiest answer would be,  
"a mission that gathers to its support  
strong men." Then the question recurs,  
with St. John the Baptist in view, as a  
pre-eminent example, "what is a strong  
man?" We know full well, and we are  
prompt to reject the counterfeits of manly  
strength. That sort of power does not lie  
in over-trained muscles, or over-taxed  
brains; or in self-conceit and swagger; or  
in superficial charm or skill; or in the glib  
tongue; or the quick wit; or the heavy  
purse; or in many phases of what is known  
as "success." It is as true of character as  
it is of physique, that the strong man is  
who has a strong heart. The Baptist waxed  
strong in spirit, and hence the reality of his  
power. So far as we know, he wrought no  
miracle. He left no memorable sermon to  
attest his gifts as an orator. He may not  
have been brilliant in intellect or culture.  
He gathered no coterie of devoted follow-  
ers. He gained no special victories, in the  
arena of controversy. I have  
been thought that, in all his days, he never  
smiled; and that no personal charm graced  
his rugged nature. What was it then that  
drew all Jerusalem to his feet, and made  
him listen to his own discourse from his own  
text? The power was in the voice, and in  
the man; in the singleness of motive; in  
the heroic bravery; in the perfect consist-  
ency; in the rare humility; in the fervor,  
and the persistency, in all which went forth  
from a great heart into a great work for  
God and man.

Now, my beloved, look into the life of a  
priest, or a mission such as this, so favored  
in many ways, so seemingly hindered in  
some ways, and ask what would you have,  
if God would give it, and at once. Surely  
the answer must be, a strong parish heart,  
in all the full meaning of that phrase.  
I. The prime need, in most of our par-  
ishes, is the need of clear and deep convic-  
tion as to what is the catholic faith, and  
what is, in its integrity, our catholic heri-  
tage. A clear and vigorous conscience is  
the secret of moral strength; churchman-  
ship must be alike intelligent and thor-  
ough, if it shall ever be, in the best sense,  
strong. Just here, where instruction has  
been large and continuous and wise, the  
first element of vigor should have been se-  
cured. Great principles of church-life have  
been taught, urged, enforced, and then en-  
shrined in the midst of ceremonial, sober,  
rich, and fairly developed. Little more,  
if sought, could have been done, to  
invigorate this mission, by infusing  
into the minds and consciences of the  
people, just what the church has received,  
and must set forth, and must transmit. Yet  
one may hold with a feeble grip, what he  
cannot deny, or he may so bring that truth  
home to his very soul, as a part of his being,

that he would die to maintain it, and, so,  
that he will live to uphold it.  
Ah, here is where the weakness of  
church-life is so often revealed, in a kind  
of churchmanship, which is not uncom-  
mon, but which is nervous, listless, rapid, inert;  
which lifts a life into a fashionable Lent,  
only that it may sink again into a fash-  
ionable Easter-tide. There is no abiding con-  
viction that life in the church of God means  
following the Son of God, as the head of  
the church, and the exemplar for all His  
people.

Probably St. John the Baptist could  
have written his creed in a very few arti-  
cles; but to those he was grandly true, in  
thought and speech, and act; in the pres-  
ence of publicans and harlots, or before  
Herod and Herodias, in their adulterous  
guilt. His convictions were perfectly clear,  
and so, he "waxed strong in spirit."

II. A parish, like a man, should live for  
a purpose; like a saintly man, for a holy  
purpose. High resolves and heartiness  
strengthens a man. It very often lies be-  
hind great achievements. Resolute pur-  
pose carries the boy to the head of his  
class, the man to a high place in his voca-  
tion. With the Baptist, the purpose of his  
life, as the herald foretelling the Christ  
perfect with a perfect tenacity. That  
purpose fired his blood, and thus he made  
the blood of men to tingle, as it coursed  
holy through their veins. The good par-  
ishioner, if he shall deserve that name, must  
cherish the one purpose in his parish life,  
as in his home life, to do his utmost for the  
welfare of the household. That purpose,  
devoutly sustained in the heart-life of every  
parishioner would lift many a struggling  
mission into place and power in the church.  
No less can be rightly asked of men. No  
less should be offered.

III. By the costliest sacrifice, the souls  
of men were ransomed. The church was  
bought by the Christ for His own. By  
costly sacrifice, in many a martyrdom, the  
church was strengthened. And by like  
sacrifices, like in spirit though unlike in  
their outward aspect, the church lives and  
grows today. What does it cost you to be  
a churchman, or a churchwoman, over and  
above what it would cost to be the devotee  
of some exacting form of idolatry? That  
is a test question, not unfairly asked and  
your contributions, in money or toil, but  
by the self-denial, which these involve and  
attest.

IV. A strong life is always shaped by  
rules, more or less sharply defined. The  
musician is alike restrained and fortified by  
the rules of his noble science. The jurist  
can hardly indulge the caprices of his  
mind, as to what the law might well have  
been. He must reach his conclusions un-  
der, and in accordance with, what are called  
principles and precedents. Life in the  
church of God, which is life for the world,  
must be guided by the law of God, as  
revealed partly in the Word of God, and as  
exemplified in the saints of God. What  
restraint was there, when the Baptist wait-  
ed in solitude until he had reached the full  
age of thirty years, thus obeying the Leviti-  
cal law, ere he came forth from the desert,  
to lift the cry—"The Kingdom of  
Heaven is at hand." He claimed no ex-  
emption for himself, as he would allow  
none to the royal sinner, on his throne. In  
our portion of the catholic church, our holy  
rule lays down very few rigid rules,  
about her festivals, and fasts, and minor  
offices, and times, and offerings, and modes  
of life, and forms of amusement. Yet she  
gives the motherly intimation, the many  
hints, with gentle authority, and expects  
her children to catch the spirit of her laws,  
and to adjust the letter in some measure to  
the aid of a good conscience. She suggests  
the rules of churchly life, and then, she  
leaves it largely for the individual in his  
growing strictness, to adopt these for him-  
self. What is not to be done by rule is  
likely not to be done at all. What is left  
to convenience and caprice is most likely,  
at last, to be omitted altogether. There  
would be a real gain, and sure strength, if  
church-folk would adopt cautiously indeed,  
but reverently, a rule—as to their eucha-  
ristic, and their daily prayers, and their  
offerings; and their private study of  
God's word; and the kind and measure  
of their fasting; and their seeking of spiri-  
tual direction; and their devotion to  
church work in their parishes. Christian  
liberty should never glide into the license of  
self-will; and the trust liberty is ever best  
secured by the wisest laws.

V. And he is strong in his work who  
calmly leaves all its results with God. You  
never think of St. John as anxiously count-  
ing the number of his disciples; the effect  
of a special sermon or interview; what men  
would call the growth of his mission. He  
leaves the desert when God wills, and be-  
cause God calls him. In the same spirit he  
bares his neck for the axe, in the mid-  
night hour, and his great soul goes home  
to God. The strength of the church is  
never found in the fuss and bustle, nor in  
the undue solicitude of God's people. They  
are not called to be anxious about the ark  
of God, but to be strong in their trustful-  
ness, and faithful in the labor, whose issues  
God above can guide, and shape, and bless.

VI. There is one added element of  
strength, which claims a moment's thought.  
It is the strength that is allied with enthu-  
siasm; without which, it is said, the noblest  
triumphs can never be won. The fire on  
the altar of the heart must ever smoke and  
blaze. In the Baptist how that fire glowed;  
as men watched the kindling flame in his  
eye, and voice, and form, as he stood by  
the river's bank, in that shaggy robe, gaunt  
and worn by his fasting, tremulous pre-  
sence, as he sent out the thrilling appeal,  
which smote and rent the hearts of  
Pharisees and hypocrites, and wrung from  
them, in their tremor the eager cry, "and  
what shall we do?"

Enthusiasm, even when grossly delu-  
ded, wield a power, which the algaard can  
never acquire. The mighty saint, whose  
festival we keep, sent out his burning mes-  
sage from a heart all aglow with the sense  
of his high calling, with the grandeur of  
Messiah's reign. Was it meant that such  
enthusiasm should die, when the Christ had  
established His Kingdom, and given to it  
the work and the promise of a world's con-

version? No, no. It was meant for us to  
light our torches at the altar of His Sacrifice,  
and then go forth on His errand, in the  
light of His love and grace.

So, we meditate awhile tonight on the  
short words of the text, and think of him  
who "waxed strong in spirit," and ask, for  
the coming year, in this Mission church,  
that we, like him whom we are wont to  
honor, may learn to be strong in our con-  
victions as to faith and duty. Strong in  
the life of high resolve; strong in the  
spirit and habit of sacrifice; strong under  
definite rules, which touch and fashion our  
souls; strong in that trustfulness which  
leans upon the strength of God; and strong  
in the enthusiasm which bears men  
on in the face of a hundred threats or  
trials, and which is the spirit of ghostly  
strength, glorious even in our weakness;  
and most glorious as seen in its triumph in  
the hour of the final reward.

God help you, my dear friends, in this  
spirit to keep your anniversary, and thus  
to enter aright upon a new year of privilege  
and service in this Mission church of St.  
John the Baptist.

### Gregory the Great.

Born of a noble Roman family about 544  
he received an education suitable to his  
rank, because a member of the senate, and  
filled several important offices of state. The  
death of his father put him in possession of  
great wealth, which he expended in found-  
ing monasteries and charitable institutions.  
Becoming dissatisfied with the world, he  
took the monastic vows and became a mem-  
ber of one of his own establishments. He  
showed great devotion to religious duties.  
Pelagius, the Bishop of Rome, falling a  
victim to a pestilence that invaded the city,  
Gregory was unanimously elected his suc-  
cessor. With genuine humility, he earnestly  
refused the honor, and loudly pro-  
claimed his unworthiness. But in vain; he  
was thrust into the vacant chair, and  
plunged at once, with all the ardour of his  
active mind, into the new constantly in-  
creasing cares of the bishopric. He was a  
great sufferer in body all his  
days. He once wrote—"I am  
so oppressed with gout that life  
is a heavy punishment. I faint daily  
through pain, and breathe after death as  
my bed when I scarce had left it, by the  
violence of pain. Thus I die daily, and  
yet live." Yet notwithstanding incessant  
affliction, the vigour of his mind was un-  
abated and his mental faculties unclouded,  
and the marvel was that with so weak a  
body he was able to pursue so laborious  
and stormy a career. He organized a mis-  
sion to Britain, which he placed under the  
superintendence of Augustine, and which  
succeeded in converting the Anglo-Saxon  
to Christianity. His astute contest with  
the patriarchy of Constantinople laid the  
foundation of the schism between the  
Greek and Latin churches, which continues  
to the present day. He also found time to  
write several commentaries and do other  
literary work. The Church of England is  
largely indebted to Gregory for the litany  
and many of the collects used in her service.

He lived with the shadow of death con-  
sciously hanging over him, and after little  
more than thirteen years of labor and suf-  
fering in his bishopric, he fell asleep in the  
year 604.  
Subjoined a brief specimen of a sermon  
preached in Rome during the prevalence of  
pestilence, and which may be taken as a  
sample of the best preaching of his time.  
"Beloved brethren, we ought to have feared  
the scourge of God before it came; at  
least, after having felt it, let us tremble.  
Let grief open to us the passages of con-  
version, and let the punishment which we  
feel dissolve the hardness of our hearts.  
"Languor does not precede death, but  
death itself with hasty strides outstrips the  
tardy caution of languor. Conceive in what  
state that man will appear before his  
Judge who is hurried off in the midst of his  
sins.  
"Let each of us repeat while we have  
time to weep before the sword devours us.  
Let us call our ways to remembrance. Let  
us come before the throne of our Father,  
and lift up our hearts with our hands to the  
Lord. Let none despair on account of the  
greatness of his crimes. Think how the  
invertebrate evils of the Ninevites were wiped  
off by three days repentance; and the con-  
verted robber in the desert, who had laid the  
obtained the rewards of life. Let us change  
our hearts, and encourage ourselves be-  
forehand with the thought that we have ob-  
tained what we ask. Importunity, so dis-  
agreeable to man, is well-pleasing to the  
God of truth; because the good and mer-  
ciful Lord loves to be overcome by prayers.  
Remember the psalmist—"Call upon me in  
the time of trouble, so will I hear thee, and  
thou shalt praise me." He admonishes us  
to call upon His name, and witnesses by  
this His readiness to forgive."

### In Love with His People.

For my part, says Dr. Tulloch, I like to  
meet a man who thinks his own congrega-  
tion, however small it may be, the most im-  
portant one in the church, and is rather  
inclined to bore you with its details. When  
man thus falls in love with his people, the  
probability is that something of the same  
kind happens to them likewise. Just as a  
wife prefers her own husband to every  
other man, though surely she does not  
necessarily suppose him to be the most  
brilliant specimen in existence, so a con-  
gregation will generally be found to prefer  
their own minister, if he is a genuine man,  
to every other, although surely not always  
entertaining the hallucination that he is a  
paragon of ability. Thus to love and to be  
loved is the secret of a happy and success-  
ful ministry.

### As God Leads Us.

When engineers would bridge a stream,  
they often carry over a single thread. With  
that the next stretch a wire across. Then  
strand is added to strand until a foundation  
is laid for planks; and now the bold en-  
gineer finds safe footing, and walks from  
side to side. So God takes from us some  
golden-threaded pleasures, and stretches it  
hence into heaven; then He takes a child,  
and then a friend. Thus He bridges death,  
and teaches the thoughtless of the time  
to find their way thither and thither between  
the two spheres.

### Man's Two Lives.

Man is a creature designed for two dif-  
ferent states of being, or rather for two  
different lives. His first life is short and  
transient; his second permanent and last-  
ing. The question we are all concerned  
in is this, in which of those lives is our  
chief interest to make ourselves happy?

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