

CHURCH BELLS.

(From the Church of England Magazine.)

Mrs. COURTESY—EDWARD—ALICE—ARTHUR.

Arthur.—Mamma, what did Mrs. M'Donald mean yesterday, when she told you she had been to see some bells christened, when she was abroad?

Mrs. C.—Just what she said, my dear; she had been to see some bells christened—some church bells.

Arthur.—Why, mamma, what nonsense; it is as bad as little Mary, last week, pretending to christen her doll, after seeing dear little Henry christened.

Edward.—Worse, I think, if I heard rightly what Mrs. M'Donald said; for she spoke of a bishop performing the ceremony, and a princess acting as godmother. What does it mean?

Mrs. C.—It means, my dear, that, among other almost incredible superstitions which have crept into the Romish church, there is actually a special service for baptising church bells.

Alice.—Mamma, it seems to me very shocking to profane the holy sacrament of baptism, by applying it to inanimate things. How could such a custom arise in any Christian church? Is it not very wicked?

Mrs. C.—It would take too long a time now to enter into the whole history; but the practice, gross as it has become, seems to have originated in the natural and proper idea of consecrating every thing devoted to the special service of God by some religious ceremony. There are many curious particulars relating to bells in connection with the church. One of the first instances, however, we hear of baptising a bell was A. D. 968, by pope John III., who baptised the great bell of the church of Lateran. By degrees, additional superstitious rites were added, till god-fathers and godmothers were appointed to answer for the bell, as in the baptism of Christians, giving it a new name, and clothing it in a new garment. It is, moreover, anointed with the chrism, or holy oil, and exorcised by the bishop. They believe this gives them power to drive the evil spirits out of the air, to calm tempests, and to extinguish fires. The name given is usually that of some saint. Thus the bells of the priory of Little Dunmow, in Essex, were baptised by the names—the first, St. Michael the archangel; 2nd, St. John the evangelist; 3rd, St. John the baptist; 4th, in honour of the assumption; 5th, in honour of the holy Trinity.

Alice.—Well, mamma, I could scarcely have believed, though, that this custom should have continued until these days; surely, if they only looked into their bibles and used their reasons, they might see the folly of it.

Mrs. C.—Granting your position, dear Alice, you must recollect that, in the Romish church—so far as the laity are concerned—they are forbidden to read their bibles, or to exercise their reason in matters relating to the church.

Arthur.—But the bishops and the priests, they must know better; surely it is very wicked in them.

Mrs. C.—It is impossible to estimate the power which early education, habit, and prejudice will obtain over the minds, not only of the good and pious, but of wise and learned men; especially where the first principle inculcated is blind, unquestioning faith. We, my dear children, have the blessed privilege of reading the word of God in our own tongue; and that we read—"Judge not, that ye be not judged." If we possess a great privilege in having been baptised into a purer branch of the holy catholic church, let us remember our responsibilities are in proportion; and, while we lament over the errors of others, let us be sure that we fall not into error ourselves. Let us take heed, while condemning their superstition, we are not ourselves wanting in zeal; above all, let us hold fast charity and humility.

Edward.—Mamma, I should like to hear something about bells. How did it happen they were used in churches?

Mrs. C.—I shall be very glad to tell you any thing I think likely to interest you about them. Bells were used by the Romans, and among some other heathen nations, to summon the people together on different occasions. They are said to have been first applied to the purposes of Christian devotion, about the year of our Lord 400, by Paulinus, Bishop of Nola, a city of Campania; hence it is supposed the names Nola and Campana were given them; the one referring to the city, the other to the country. In Britain they were applied to church purposes before the conclusion of the seventh century; and they were, therefore, used from the first erection of parish churches. There is something very affecting in the thought that, among all the changes and chances of so many centuries, religious as well as civil, the same sounds in each successive age have summoned the members of Christ's church, on each succeeding sabbath, to the worship of "God." How many generations have lived and died and passed into eternity, who have listened to those bells which are even now sounding in our ears! But, to return. I will give you, Edward, an old Latin distich, describing the various uses of bells.

"Lauda Deum verum, plebem voco, coadjuro clerum, Defunctos ploro, festos rego, festa decoro."

Now give us a translation into English.

Edward.—I will try. It is this: "I praise the true God; I call the people; I draw together the clergy; I mourn for the dead; I drive away pestilence; I adorn festivals."

Mrs. C.—Very well: this gives us some idea of the uses to which bells were supposed to be applicable; indeed, all of these are still in operation as much as ever, except as regards the driving away pestilence. And now I will give you another; and this time I shall turn to you, Arthur, for the meaning. I must tell you these, or such like distichs, were frequently engraven on the bells.

"Funera plango, fulgura frango, sabata pango. Excito lentos, dissipio ventos, paco creturos."

Arthur.—"Funera plango;" oh! that is "tolling for a funeral." "Fulgura frango," "I break the lightning." What does that mean?

Mrs. C.—The custom of tolling or ringing bells at the approach of thunder-storms is of some antiquity; but it is supposed that the design was not so much to shake the air, and so disperse the thunder, as to call the people to church to pray for the safety of the parish.

Arthur.—Well, there was some sense in that; now for the rest. "Sabata pango"—that's easy enough—"I ring on the sabbath." "Excito lentos," "I excite the slow;" that means hurrying the people who are behind their time. "Disippo ventos," "I disperse the wind-storms." "Paco creturos," "I appease the cruel."

Alice.—What does that mean, mamma?

Mrs. C.—It applies, no doubt, to the supposed power of bells to drive away evil spirits. You must bear in mind that these distichs were made when superstition had gained much influence; but, as in the case of ringing in thunder-storms, we might possibly be able often to trace back the origin to a pious and rational motive.

Edward.—What does the "passing-bell" mean? I often see it alluded to in poetry.

Mrs. C.—The "passing-bell" was a bell rung, when one of the congregation or parish was dying, to call on all who heard it to pray for the departing soul; and it is still ordered in the canons of our church, I believe, that it should cease as soon as the person is dead: this is intended as a precaution against the Roman custom of praying for the souls of the dead; but it also proves the custom was not abolished at the reformation, though the abuse of it was guarded against.

Arthur.—But is the passing-bell never tolled now?

Mrs. C.—I believe, never.

Alice.—And yet it seems very bright and charitable to pray for dying persons.

Mrs. C.—This is a vulgar error, with no real foundation.

Mrs. C.—It is, indeed, one of those remnants of catholic Christianity one cannot but regret the disuse of. It served to remind us of all we most need reminding of ourselves, that "in the midst of life we are in death," and marks the oneness of Christian fellowship with others.

Edward.—Why was it given up? for it seems it has not been abolished—only fallen into disuse.

Mrs. C.—I cannot tell you exactly; but probably from the great dread of popery which, at different periods, has arisen; and which caused the disuse of some things in themselves not indecorous, but which had been abused to evil purposes. Men are often led to mistake the reverse of wrong for right. But this brings me to what I wished to say especially in regard to our own church-bells, as they are now used; for, after all, our conversation does little good, unless we can derive some practical benefit from the various effects attributed to bells in our Latin lines, which are still preserved among ourselves.

Arthur.—Let me see: in the first place, we have still "Lauda Deum verum" (I praise the true God); "Plebem voco" (I call the people); "Defunctos ploro" (I lament for the dead); "Festa decoro" (I adorn festivals).

Edward.—And from the second distich, "Funera plango;" "Sabata pango;" and I dare say, sometimes, "Excito lentos."

Mrs. C.—Well; does it, then, seem too much to say that, by the church-bells, the church mixes and blends, as it were, religion audibly with all the affairs of life—its duties, its joys, its sorrows? May we not, without superstition, call it a voice from the church, calling aloud to those who will heed—not, alas! as formerly, day by day, and hour by hour, but at least once in the week—to remember "the assembling of ourselves together?" Does it not, on days of festivity, remind us that all good things come from above, and that we must,

"In our hours of gladness, Bless him who gives us all."

Moreover, when we recollect that the same sounds are floating over the length and breadth of the land—nay, on every distant shore where our church is established, that, from century to century, the same voice has been sounding on; does it not bring a sense of the unity of Christ's church, a feeling of brotherhood and charity, a deeper sense of the preponderance of eternal over temporal things, of the perpetuity of that church which is our bond of union with all its living members and with all its departed saints. For myself, I never hear a church bell without some thoughts coming over me, more or less; and I find them so grateful—and, I think, so beneficial—that I would willingly impart them to others.

Alice.—Mamma I think I understand you; and in future, when I hear church-bells, I will try to think so of them.

Edward.—Think how, Alice?

Alice.—Why, when they are ringing for church, I would think how many fellow-Christians are being called, as I am, to worship God in his holy church; and that "we are all one in Christ;" and when I hear them tolling, I will try to think how another soul has passed away to its everlasting doom, and that we none of us know how soon we may be called; and then to recollect that others—other Christians—are in trouble, and that we are commanded to feel for one another; and, if there were a "passing-bell" I should pray for the dying person.

Arthur.—'nd when the joy-bells ring, Alice?

Alice.—O, then I would rejoice too: if for some private cause—as a marriage—for the people themselves; if for any general rejoicing, with all the world, thanking God, who sinners though we be, gives us so many blessings.

Mrs. C.—I am glad to find, Alice, you understand me so well. Be assured, the more you learn to extend your sympathies, the happier you will be—the more in accordance with the will of him who is love. And now, my dear children, I must leave you: if you wish to know more of the subject generally, I can give you books to refer to.

Edward.—Mamma, I do not remember any thing about bells in the bible.

Mrs. C.—I apprehend one of the earliest, if not quite the earliest, historical mention of bells is in the bible; though not applied to the same purpose as in modern times, still employed in the worship of God. Can you tell me where?

Edward.—I think I know what you mean; and the high-priest of the Jews had bells on his garment.

Mrs. C.—Yes, you are right. There is also another mention of bells in the bible, when the prophet Zechariah, in foretelling the kingdom of Christ, says—"There shall be in that day upon the bells of the horses, Holiness to the Lord."

Alice.—For what purpose were the bells on the dress of the high-priest?

Mrs. C.—When he went into the holy of holies, he wore them, that the people who waited without might know it, and join in prayer; so that even there, you perceive, they were associated with the worship of God. And now, farewell; and, when you listen to the church-bells of your native land, thank God you were born in a Christian country, freed from the clouds of superstition which have overshadowed the purity of Christianity in other lands; think also with gratitude on those pious ceremonies—of whatsoever kind—which, as they preceded, so have they survived, the contamination which for a while spread even here; witnessing to us, even as a voice from the dead, yet uniting us evermore to the living church of Christ.

of his sorrow; and at doomsday when the terrors are universal, besides that it is itself so much greater, because it can afflict the whole world, it is also made greater by communication and a sorrowful influence; grief being then strongly infectious, when there is no variety of state, but an entire kingdom of fear; and amazement is the king of all our passions and all the world its subjects; and that shriek must needs be terrible, when millions of men and women at the same instant shall fearfully cry out, and the noise shall mingle with the trumpet of the archangel, with the thunders of the dying and groaning heavens, and the crack of the dissolving world, when the whole fabric of nature shall shake into dissolution and eternal ashes.—Bishop Jeremy Taylor.

THINGS TEMPORAL AND ETERNAL. That the things which are seen are eternal, is indeed no sufficient proof that there are things which are not seen which are eternal. Though it is a great presumption, that since God has not fitted this world to our desires, he has fitted our desires to another world; and has not given us those cravings of nature merely to vex and torment us, without any possibility of their being satisfied; but thus far we prove, from the things of this world being temporal, that they cannot make us happy. And this makes religion to be a very serious concern, since all our hopes of happiness depend on it: for if religion cannot furnish objects adapted to our natural desires, nothing else can; and therefore men should think soberly and naturally before they reject religion, and divest themselves of all the hopes they have, or can have, of being happy. Who would not be glad to live for ever, and to be for ever happy? Is it not then very unnatural to see a man rejoice and triumph in the thoughts that there is neither a life nor happiness which is eternal? It is, indeed, better not to be, than to be miserable; and therefore the thoughts of dropping into everlasting silence and darkness may be the refuge of guilty fear, but never can be a natural joy or comfort to the soul of man, which longs for nothing so much as life for evermore. The only reason any man can possibly have to wish that there may be no other world, is, that he may with the more freedom enjoy this; and this must needs appear to be a wise reason, if we consider the value of this world, and the worth of these things, which are no sooner seen but they are gone, and their place is no more found. I should not wonder, were this world to last for ever, to see men of low and abject spirits setting up their rest, and giving up the hopes of more exalted glory and happiness; but now that the world must last but a little time, and we much less, to see men sacrifice their hopes of glory and immortality to the mean and poor enjoyments of this world, is such an absurdity as would puzzle any one to account for, who knew nothing more of man than that he is a reasonable creature. It is so little men gain by gaining this world, and so little they lose by losing it, that the concerns of this world weigh but light in this question, that were not men guided more by the violence of their passion, than either by reason or the regular desires of nature.—Bishop Sherlock.

MAN'S DANGEROUS SITUATION. That man were put in great peril and jeopardy, that should hang over a very deep pit, holden up by a weak and slender cord or line, in whose bottom should be most wild and cruel beasts of every kind, abiding with great desire his falling down; for that intent when he shall fall down upon to devour him; which line or cord that he hangeth by should be holden up and staid only by the hands of that man to whom, by his manifold ungentleness, he hath ordered and made himself as a very enemy. If now under me were such a very deep pit, and that there be nothing whereby I might be holden up and secured, but a broken bucket or pail, which should hang by a small cord staid and holden up only by the hands of him to whom I have behaved myself as an enemy and adversary, by great and grievous injuries and wrongs done unto him, would ye not think me in perilous condition?—yes, without fail. Truly all we be in like manner; for under us is the horrible and fearful pit of hell, where the black devils in the likeness of ramping and cruel beasts doth abide, desirous our falling down to them. The lion, the tiger, the bear, or any other wild beast, never layeth so busily wait for his prey when he is hungry, as doth these great and horrible hell-bound devils, for that is their none of us living but is holden up from falling down to hell in as feeble and frail a vessel hanging by as weak a line as may be. I beseech you, what vessel may be more brittle and frail than is our body, that daily needeth reparation, and if that refresh it not anon, it peisheth and cometh to naught; and therefore Solomon, in the book called Ecclesiastes, comprehendeth the body of man to a pot that is brittle, saying, "Remember—have mind on thy Creator and Maker in the time of thy young age, or ever the pot be broken upon the fountain. Oh, good God! how fearful condition stand we in if we remember these jeopardies and perils—and if we do not remember them we may say, oh, marvellous blindness!—your own madness never enough to be wailed and cried out upon. Heaven is above us, wherein Almighty God is resplendent and abiding, which giveth himself to us as our Father, if we obey and do according to his holy commandments; the deepness of hell is under us; our sins and wickedness be afore us; behind us be the times and spaces that were offered to do satisfaction and penance which we have negligently lost; on our right hand be all the benefits of our most good and meek Lord, Almighty God given unto us; and on our left hand the unmeasurable misfortunes that might have happened if that Almighty God had not defended us by his goodness and meekness. Within us is the most stinking abomination of our sins, whereby the image of Almighty God in us is very foul and deformed, and by that we be made unto him very enemies. By all these things before rehearsed, we have provoked the dreadful Majesty of him unto so great wrath, that we must needs fear lest that he let fall this line of life from his hand, and the pot of our body be broken, and we then fall down into the deep dungeon of hell.—Fisher, Bishop Rochester, (Put to death A. D. 1535.)

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