

GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

After devotional exercises, the retiring Moderator, the Rev. R. F. Burns, D. D., preached the Assembly sermon as follows:

Then they said, one to another, we do not well; this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; if we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will come upon us; now, therefore, come that we may go and tell the king's household.—2 Kings vii. 9.

Our text recalls an incident in the history of the kingdom of Israel, when Samaria, her capital, was a beleaguered garrison, girdled by the triumphant hosts of Syria, an I Jehovah whose allegiance she had a jured, proved himself, in straits a present aid. Famine stalked, gaunt and ghastly, through the besieged city, mowing down its victims and numbering up its slain on every side. The lofty and the lowly shared in the common calamity. The obdurate and obstinate monarch held Elisha responsible for these nameless horrors, and sought to compass his destruction, but, after all, God's "good and faithful servant," was to prove as the "poor wise man," of whom the preacher speaks, who was to "save the city," and when it seemed that he would fall a sacrifice to royal cruelty and caprice, God wondrously commanded deliverance for him. He prophesied plenty on the morrow, an idea which a Samaritan aristocrat could not entertain, but in spite of this lordling's sneer and scepticism, Jehovah-jeh marvellously fulfilled the word of His servant. On the afternoon of the day when the prophecy was uttered, four lepers wandering in sorrow and solitude outside the city limits, shrunk from, by friend and foe alike, resolve at all hazards to risk entering the Syrian camp. Guided by the light of the moon, these unfortunate outcasts reach the camp of the enemy. To their surprise it is deserted. They slip quietly from tent to tent, but, not a solitary soul accosts them. The Lord had gone out before them and caused the Syrians to hear the noise of horses and a noise of chariots, even the noise of a great host. The Syrians, supposing that the sorely pressed Samaritans had received reinforcements from the kings of the Hittites and the kings of the Egyptians, fled in haste and confusion. The surprised lepers found the tents filled with food and raiment and treasure. After partaking to satiety they began to think of their poor perishing fellow countrymen. Though they had been driven beyond the pale of society, they would take no reprisals. All other considerations are overborne by the claims of kindred and humanity. To gorge themselves when their brethren were starving seemed cruel in the extreme. "Then, they said one to another, we do not well; this day is to us a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace, if we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will come upon us, now therefore, come that we may go and tell." Fathers and Brethren, I need not to inform you that multitudes of our fellow-men are in a condition more pitiful and perilous than that of the besieged Samaritans. They are victims of a famine, such as Amos described (viii. 11), "Not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord." They are fettered by the chains of superstition. They are shut up as within a besieged city which no earthly enginery can scale or storm. They are in want—of spiritual provision. They perish for lack of knowledge. We have enough and to spare. We have been "fed to fulness on the Bread of Heaven." We have done a little in carrying it round among the starving companies of humanity. We have not enough had "compassion on the multitude when we saw that they had nothing to eat." Have we not too often, regardless of the curse of Merodach—"slept o'er the cup of blessings and forgotten to gather up, even the fragments of the feast for famished, suppliant heathen." Accommodating our text, as we conceive legitimately, in this way we invite your attention to the four points presented:

- (1). First, the fact stated: "This day is a day of good tidings."
- (2). Secondly, the sin involved: "We do not well if we hold our peace."
- (3). Thirdly, the risk incurred: "Mischief will befall us;" and
- (4). Lastly, the duty taught: "Now, therefore, come, that we may go and tell."

A DAY OF GOOD TIDINGS.

I. In the first place, let us notice the fact stated. "This day is to us a day of good tidings." Worse than these besieged Samaritans were we. To foes more formidable than Benhadad and his forces were we exposed. It was as evident in our case as in stricken Samaria's that "the battle was not ours but the Lord's." It was as visibly a divine interposition as when, without any show of fight, or the play of a solitary engine of death, there broke upon the terrified Syrians "the noise of a great host." When we had destroyed ourselves, in Him our help was found who is the Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Single-handed the Captain of salvation came to the close grapple with the rulers of the darkness of this world, treading the wine-press alone, yet travelling in the greatness of His strength—bowing His head, yet stooping to conquer, for in the very act of apparent discomfiture, He spoiled the principalities and powers, and made a show of them openly, trampling over them in His cross. This day, therefore, is to us a day of good tidings because it revealeth the right hand and the holy arm that hath gotten us the victory, and proclaim the signal achievements of Him who hath remembered us in our low estate because His mercy endureth forever, and hath saved us out of the hand of our enemies for His grace faileth never. "Tidings, my Lord, O King," cried the panting runner from an ancient battlefield. These were tidings of defeat and disgrace which almost broke the heart of the stunned monarch in whose ears they were sounded. But "behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy which are for you and for all people."

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION.

The next day of which my text speaks, brought the good tidings of food and clothing, and treasure in abundance to these outcast lepers and to their imprisoned fellow country-

men; and have we not been anointed to preach glad tidings to the meek; to bind up the broken-hearted; to proclaim deliverance to the captive and the opening of the prison doors to the bound; to counsel souls, imprisoned and impoverished, to buy the fine gold, and the white raiment and the eye salve. Not more acceptable were the bounties of the eastern camp to these four lepers, and that starving population than are the blessings of the Gospel to those tainted with the leprosy of sin. No gladder news to the famine stricken Samaritans did these lepers bring than it is our privilege to bring to our people every Sabbath, when we speak to the guilty of pardon, to the polluted of purity, to the troubled of peace, to the ignorant of the excellency of the knowledge of Christ, to the wretched and miserable and poor, and blind, and naked, of sight, riches, healing of the mind, yea, all we need in Him to find. Sad that so many should repeat the unbelief of the Samaritan Lord! The table is spread: the invitation is given; the door is open, and yet there is room. But, to this feast of fat things, richer far than the deserted tents of Syria supplied, how many enter not in because of unbelief; "how few receive with cordial faith the tidings which we bring!" The evil heart of unbelief still cries: "Were the Lord to make windows in heaven might such a thing be," though the promise stands firm as the everlasting hills. "Prove me now, here with, saith the Lord, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing." Would that souls to-day were as eager for the bread of life as were these hungry Samaritans for the bread that perisheth! And if beneath the hurrying feet of this pressing crowd, the unbelieving Lord of Samaria was trodden, of how much sorer punishment suppose ye, will they be thought worthy who trample under foot the Son of God.

In a special sense will this be a day of good tidings to those sections of our Church that have received during the year a special blessing? It is ground for thanksgiving, fathers and brethren, as not a few of our reports on the State of Religion testify, that so many in different parts of our wide field have tasted that the Lord is gracious, and feasted with relish on Him whose flesh is meat indeed and whose blood is drink indeed. Happy the people that are in such a case! "The day of your espousals and the day of the gladness of your heart" you may well call "a day of good tidings."

THE VICTORIAN ERA.

The progress in literature and philosophy, in science and art that has marked the Victorian era makes this emphatically to us, as free born Britons "a day of good tidings." These fifty years of beneficent rule—for whose completion we have recently held so joyous a jubilee, have conferred untold blessings within and beyond the limits of our Empire. Many have been running to and fro, and knowledge has been increased as never before. The triumphs achieved in almost every department of human investigation, though in certain aspects adverse, have turned out the rather unto the furtherance of the Gospel. The number of those rescued from the beleaguered strongholds of sin and Satan, and who have taken seats at the table spread in presence of their foes, is larger than at any previous period. There never were as many Christians as to-day. There were never as many Bibles. In a single year the British and Foreign Bible Society alone issued more copies than existed in the entire world when in 1804 that society was organized. The literary, locomotive and governmental facilities supplied, the great doors and effectual opened, though there be many adversaries, the concentration of so many elements of influence, political, financial, scientific and otherwise in the great Protestant powers, contribute to render this peculiarly a day of good tidings. What a change in less than a century! In 1792 but one missionary society. Now they are counted by the hundred. Then but one or two missionaries and no native preachers, now about 2,500 European and American missionaries and hundreds of sanctified natives telling to their fellows

THE STORY OF THE CROSS.

Then no converts at all (we can recall the graphic picture drawn by an eminent living divine of the delighted and wondering look of his mother as she came home from one of the old-time missionary meetings, exclaiming in almost breathless excitement: "There's a convert! There's a convert!"), now thousands of converts every year and a Christian population counted by millions. Then \$65, the first tiny rill of Christian liberality—that started in the chapel vestry at Kettering—now, \$10,000,000 yearly, the swelling river that is bearing on its bosom blessings manifold to all lands. It is a great privilege and responsibility to be living at such a pivotal epoch. It seems as if we were on the eve of achievements, such as the Church and the world have never witnessed. The girdled garrisons are sending forth their captives. The armies of the aliens are hearing the "noise of a host," such as that which caused the Syrians to flee. "We are living. We are living in a grand and awful time."

AROUND OUR COUNCIL FIRE.

Fathers and Brethren, as we gather here in solemn council to survey the field and the forces, to rest on our arms and have them furnished afresh, let us think of our brave brothers—and sisters too, on the places of the field—who feel often, in their fewness and feebleness, "we have no might against this great multitude, but our eyes are upon Thee." May theirs be to the full the blessing promised to descend on the crown of the head of him that was separated from his brethren! Let us keep up closer than ever our communication with headquarters, let us be ever looking unto Jesus, the Captain of our salvation. Let us not be mean and niggardly but liberal and large-hearted in the support of our commissariat, and "take to arm us for the fight the 'panoply of God.'" Let us be prompt and energetic, even enthusiastic, in the sending out of reinforcements. And as these little bands that have gone from us make their periodical rounds, sounding the trumpet of the Gospel, let us in the closet and at the family altar, when, "watching with Jesus one hour" through the week, and "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together" on

the day which the Lord hath made, let us in the meetings of all our Church Courts, Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods and this the highest of our holy convocations, on this which is especially to us a day of good tidings—send up this united and importunate cry, to God most High, to God who can perform all things for us, to the son of God who has gone forth to war, a kingly crown to gain. "Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most Mighty." "Arise, O Lord, let Thine enemies be scattered, and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee."

SIN INDICATED.

II. Let us notice secondly the sin involved. "We do not well;" "if we hold our peace." The peculiar advantages which render the present a day of good tidings roll over on us the burden of a weightier accountability. With reference to this there should be "great searchings of heart." In many strongholds of the enemy, breaches have been made. Have we entered in and planted the standard of the cross to the extent we ought and might? Are there not spots where the banner droops because there is not another man to unfurl it? Do we give and pray and labour as we should? Of how few can it be said, "she hath done what she could?" When, in some emergency, the marvel power even of one frail mortal is called out, what marvels have been wrought! Too often it has been a giving what we can spare, a doing what costs us little, a praying in feeble and fitful tones; we might have spoken for a dying world, a word to dying souls; a word in the ears of Him who has all power; a word in others' ears as well, but we were silent. Ourselves free and feasting, we have thought not, as we ought, of our fellows shut up and famishing. Even Christians, as in the days of the herdsman of Tekoah, "will dance to the sound of the viol and drink wine in bowls, but are not grieved for the afflictions of Joseph." Like the thoughtless, merry-makers at the pit mouth. "We are verily guilty concerning our brother, for when we saw the anguish of his soul we would not hearken."

In thus holding our peace we do not well:

1. We are not true to the Master. We fail to carry out His precepts, His prayers, His practice. We have often said, "Lord, what wouldst Thou have me to do?" He hath "appointed to every man His work." He hath laid on us the command: "Go, work to-day in my vineyard." "Go ye into all the world." The charity of the great commission circumnavigates the world. Though it "begins at home it must not end there." His commandments in this matter are not grievous, but we have not made haste and ceased not to keep them. We have not said, everyone to his neighbour and brother, know ye the Lord? We have too much "held our peace." We do not well. We have not acted out the Master's prayers. "Neither pray I for those alone." Our own illustrious reformer broke the silence of the night watches with "Gave me Scotland or I die." Our blessed Redeemer embraced within the range of His sympathies a wider sweep. He held the world in His arms before His Father in the upper room, as well as when

"Cold mountains and the midnight air
Witnessed the fervour of His prayer."

Nor do we reflect the Master's example. He gave, he lived, he laboured, to the extent of feeling. While we too often grudge in the matter of money, he gave "not such corruptible things as silver and gold," but His own most precious blood. "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business." His first recorded utterance; "It is finished," His last—mirror His life. Have we most distantly approached the measure of service and sacrifice rendered by Him who hath left us an example that we should follow His steps? "We do not well, for if we hold our peace"

2. We are not true to our profession. When one said, I am the Lord's, and another subscribed to that blessed name, what meant we by this service? It meant work. It meant the consecration of our persons and property, and time and talents, and influence, and all.

Our vows bore this meaning. Knowing as we did, full well that, not on angels was the duty of bringing back our wandering star devolved, we engaged to do our part. But have we done it? Have we spoken to Jesus for others, and to others for Jesus as we ought? Alas! too often we held our peace instead of resolving—"for Zion's sake I will not hold my peace."

3. We do not well; for we have not been true to our prayers. Time and again have we prayed "Thy Kingdom come," but have we done to hasten its coming? If all were to do, as some of us, would it ever come?

RISK INCURRED.

III. The risk incurred by Indolence and Indifference, falls next to be considered. "If we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will befall us."

1. Our own holiness and happiness will be affected thereby. Is not that mischief? If we "exercise ourselves unto godliness" such spiritual gymnastics will make our souls prosper and be in health. If we stand all the day idle our powers will be shrivelled and shrunken. There will not be the effectual working in the measure of every part, making increase of the body. Nor, if inactive, will we be happy any more than holy. Christ's joy will not remain in us, nor will our joy be full, if, in the matter of any duty which is present and pressing, we "tarry till the morning light." The joy of this salvation belongs not to the lazy lingerer. If we go mourning all our days, instead of tasting that joy of the Lord, which might be "our strength," we have ourselves generally to blame for it. It is part of the "mischief" that has come upon us, for holding our peace.

2. A large portion of this "mischief" will consist in the forfeiture of the Master's favour and the incurring of His frown. It was not His way to "tarry" when danger or duty were imminent. In Prophecy He is represented as saying "for Zion's sake I will not hold my peace, for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest." Nor forget what He is now doing. "I am alive for evermore."—That life is one of ceaseless action. "He ever liveth to make intercession." If others are silent and slumber, the keeper of Israel never slumbers.