THE OFFICE OF RITUAL IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH,

ST. CATHARINES,

ON WEDNESDAY, APRIL 4, 1866;

BEFORE THE CLERICAL ASSOCIATION OF THE RURAL DEANERY OF NIAGARA.

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PUBLISHED FOR THE ASSOCIATION.

TORONTO:

PRINTED BY H. ROWSELL, KING STREET EAST.

1866.

SERMON.

"God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.—St. John, iv. 24.

Every enquiry which relates to man's communion with his Maker—to the Christian's filial access to Him who is our Father in Christ—must of necessity possess for us a very deep interest, and demand of us most serious attention. And if, at times, such enquiries present themselves accompanied by perturbing and perplexing circumstances—by occasions for alarm and disquietude, yet ought we not to doubt that He, whose wisdom still educes good out of evil, may be, for very excellent ends, forcing upon us a more searching examination into principles and rules of action, in respect of which we have, perchance, hitherto been content to be but superficially informed.

The great truth which our blessed Lord declares in the text is one which none among us will dispute; existing differences concern the *mode* in which spiritual worship is to be fostered and strengthened. And, again, the history of the past—the experience of the present—alike teach

us that, on this subject, the danger of error lies not on one side only; we know, as an obvious fact, that men have erred respecting this matter by pushing their opinions towards opposite extremes. We know that spiritual worship, while it involves far more than any bodily service can possibly represent, is yet not to be attained by forgetting how Almighty God has constituted us, and by attempting, without the body, to worship aright the Creator of the body. We are, or ought to be, all of us prepared, as intelligent recipients of the teaching of Holy Scripture—as sincere members of the Church to which we belong, to acknowledge that the body has its appropriate—its indispensable—duties in the service of Almighty God.

Accordingly, if a difference of opinion subsists respecting the auxiliaries of divine service and the mode of conducting that service, between those who allow, on the one hand, that *spiritual* worship must be offered, and, on the other, that the body must take its part in the service, any such difference, important as it may be felt to be, may yet appear, at first sight, to be a difference not in respect of any *principle*, but rather in respect of the *application* of a principle admitted by both parties.

Some will say that it is a question only of degree between what is called sober ritual and

what is called extreme—that habit or natural temperament gives every man his bias—that every man holds to what has become endeared to him by custom or to what approves itself to his own sense of reverence and of holy beauty.

If this were so we should be compelled at once to resign ourselves to the existence of jarring opinions and practices as an inevitable evil, while we might still be astonished that they who are honestly and devoutly seeking to serve the same God should be so widely separated by a difference traceable to no diversity of principle—originating in no error of judgment, but simply in variety of taste—in diversity of perception.

My object will be, if possible, to refer these differences to a diversity of principle—to a difference of judgment; being assured that, if this can be done, the subject will be relieved of much of its painful perplexity, and we shall not be left to draw, at our own caprice, an arbitrary line between that which we pronounce to be moderate and that which we condemn as extreme, but shall be provided with a law, the spirit of which may offer us its universal and reasonable guidance, whatever may be our mistakes in detail in testing special cases by it.

The sacred Scriptures, then, both of the Old and of the New Testaments, appear to recognize three distinct principles in the nature of man, the spirit,

the soul, and the body. So St. Paul says to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. v. 23,) "And I pray God your whole spirit, and soul, and body, be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ;" and in the sixteenth Psalm (v. 9), David says: "Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope,"—where the *heart* appears to correspond to the spirit, and the *glory* to the soul. So again he says (Psalm lvii. 7, 8), "My *heart* is fixed, O God, my *heart* is fixed; I will sing and give praise. Awake up, my *glory;* awake, lute and harp." And again (Psalm cviii. 1), "O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise even with my *glory*."

Of these three principles the spirit is the highest: it is that with which the Divine Spirit holds direct communion, on which the renovation of man's nature primarily takes effect, and through which the benefit of that renewal is communicated to the other constituent portions of his nature. So the Apostle St. Paul reminds the Ephesians that they had been taught the necessity of being renewed "by the spirit of their mind."* The

* The English Version has here "*in* the spirit of your mind," which rendering somewhat obscures the meaning of the original. The passage is equally available for the present purpose, whether we understand, with Bishop Ellicott, that "the spirit" is the Divine Spirit, and "the mind" that on

soul, again, holds the middle place, being in direct communication alike with the spirit and with the body; susceptible of inward teaching and influence derived from the spirit, and of impressions from without, flowing in through the senses of the body. It is thus dependent, to a certain extent, upon both the spirit and the body, yet designed, in obedience to the spirit, to exercise legitimate dominion over the body—not to become in anywise its slave. In consequence of the central position which the soul thus occupies in the constitution of man, and of its being the seat of the will and the affections, it would seem to be the true centre of the personality, so that the acts of a man are referrible to it, rather than to any other portion of his being.

We may, therefore, rightly regard the soul of man as that which offers worship to Almighty God, and our enquiry must accordingly be, whether, in that act of worship, the soul is to depend chiefly upon the spirit or upon the body.

This is, indeed, a very grave enquiry; and it is greatly to be wished that it had been thoroughly handled and elucidated by some one well qualified for the task; for I cannot but think that, if the

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which He acts, namely, the human spirit under its intellectual aspect; or, with Dean Alford, interpret "the spirit" as the restored and divinely-informed leading principle of the "mind."

relations of the soul to the spirit and to the body respectively in regard of the act of worship—the duties of the soul to the one and to the other in regard of that act—were distinctly and forcibly set forth, we should have a plain practical rule proposed to us, which would clear up many of our doubts, and relieve us from the pain of feeling that the rules we may prescribe to ourselves or to others are arbitrary, and consequently more or less partial and unreasonable.

At all events, it must, I think, be confessed, that, in Divine worship, the soul must repose itself upon the guidance of the spirit—on that higher part of man's nature, which comes in direct contact with the Blessed Spirit of Grace, which is first made conscious of His light and heat, which primarily receives and appropriates both His written teaching and His inward illumination, and then imparts their hallowing influences to the affections and to the will whose dwelling is in the human soul. Surely, in the solemn act of Divine worship, the soul should submit herself to the guidance of that higher principle which God set in the place of sovereignty when He made man at the first—and which He reinstates, in the act of regeneration, in the supremacy which it had lost, and clothes with new powers to reassert the dominion which it had forfeited by transgression.

But, it may be asked, can the soul, in worship,

be independent of the body? No: nor are we to desire that it should be. The whole man is to worship God. David forgets not the worship of the body; he says, "O come, let us worship and *fall down*, and *kneel* before the Lord, our Maker." He does not forget even those inanimate instruments of service, of which the body may avail itself. When he says to the soul, "Awake up, my glory," he adds, "Awake, lute and harp." The soul cannot be independent of the body, it must accompany her in the act of worship; the posture—the gestures—of the body may assist or hinder her devotion; her devotion may be aided or disturbed by those impressions which are made upon her through the bodily senses.

And thus the first rule which we must propose to ourselves is this, that, so far as the body is concerned, the worship of the soul may not be *hindered.* And it has often appeared to me, that if this one rule were duly extended—interpreted with sufficient liberality—it would cover almost all which the body can contribute towards religious worship. "Lift up your hearts," the Priest cries in the celebration of the Holy Communion; and, when we reply, "We lift them up unto the Lord," what can the body contribute to this spiritual ascent, save that lowly gesture, the withholding of which would hinder an act, direct participation in which is beyond all its powers? As the removal of an

hindrance—as the laying aside of a weight—as the setting of the soul free—the worship of the body is of the utmost importance, but in these particulars it would seem that its share in Divine service, though positive in respect of itself, is rather negative in respect of any aid rendered to the soul. And, again, when we look to all those external circumstances of Divine service, of which the soul becomes cognizant through the bodily senses, would not the rule of removing hindrances—of putting away disturbances, if it were liberally interpreted, carry us a long way at least towards what we seek in respect of outward solemnity? We desire to shut out the world—to remove from our sight all that is alien to the solemn work in which we are engaged; we desire that the house of God should present nothing unbecoming its sacred name—its holy purpose: and, if this were effected, would not very much have been done towards rendering the externals of our service what they should be?

Let me not be misunderstood. I am not speaking now of the teaching conveyed to the human heart by the solemn temples which Christian men have in all ages delighted to rear; I am not saying that the significance of their several details may not furnish to many a devout mind most profitable subjects for religious meditation—most valuable means of religious instruction—that we

may not find sermons in the very stones of God's house; I do not say that, even at the hour of worship, the sense of reverence may not be deepened as we lift up our eyes on some venerable and beautiful monument of the faith and love of ages past: I am merely contending that, so far as the soul is influenced through the bodily senses, much—very much—far more than we should at first allow—has been effected, where mere hindrances and offences have been put away.

But as I can have no wish—so have I no intention to assign this purely *negative* character to all external worship; it may be *positive*, and yet hold a very *subordinate* place in respect of that higher worship which the human soul must learn to offer. "He that planted the ear"—He that "made man's mouth," knew well to what holy uses the human voice might be employed, and how sweet and solemn sounds might interpret to the attentive soul the exquisite sense of words which "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Let the body minister here, and be honoured in its service; but let it minister as a servant to its mistress, let it not proudly and wantonly attempt to enthrall the soul as its captive. She must seek her higher inspiration elsewhere: she may drink in, well pleased, natural sounds, but these, after all, should but faintly echo melodies of heaven which she has caught from the

teaching of the spirit. For it is to that which is above her that she must mainly look, not to that which is below; she is not to gaze eagerly and anxiously without, but much rather to concentrate her powers on that which is within; not to seek the chief stimulus to her devotion in sights and sounds external, but to abstract herself, as much as may be, from all outward things, in order that she may recognize a silent teaching and realize an unseen presence.

I believe that we should be drawn nearer far to one another could we all embrace more fully than we do the apprehension of that unseen presence of our Lord: and it would appear that, beyond certain reverential and modest limits, outward observances tend rather to obscure, than to intensify, the sense of that presenee. Let us consider how we should demean ourselves could we indeed *see* our Blessed Lord in our midst, and let us ask whether anything in the way of ritual observance, which His visible presence would necessarily restrain if not rebuke, can be an important—or even a legitimate—aid to the realization of His unseen presence? No, let the soul turn to the spirit in worship, to God's Holy Spirit speaking to her through the spirit, and thus shall she be enabled to discern a glory which shall compensate for all inevitable external deficiencies, and eclipse all external splendours; she shall be enabled to

ascend, as Elijah did, into the mount of God, while she leaves her servant the body (even as he left his servant), not unmindful indeed of her sacred errand, yet unable to keep pace with her heavenward flight.

The wise man has said, "Be not rash with thy mouth, nor let thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God, for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few."—(Eccles. v. 2.) And, surely, if we are thus to "prune our words," to impose a reverent and cautious reserve upon the *language* of devotion, far more necessary must it be to do this in respect of other accessories of worship, which partake not of the mixed character of language, but are *purely* bodily or external.

It may, however, be said that public worship is the worship of the body—external worship—in its very design and purpose; and that *common* worship cannot be offered except under such conditions as would seem here to be excluded; that it is, of necessity, an appeal made to the soul through the body. To this the answer would appear to be that, while we must fully recognize this phase of common worship and exclude nothing which it necessarily involves, we must, at the same time, never suffer ourselves to forget that *all* acceptable worship must be spiritual worship, and that, if this be granted, the service of the body must ever be a

subordinate service, differing very widely from what it would naturally become, if the soul had no higher guide to whom to commit herself, no other inspiration to seek than that which is to be derived from sights and sounds external.

It may further be questioned whether ritual is not by some regarded as possessing even a higher function than that of ministering to the devout affections of the soul—whether it is not also supposed to be a very important mean of instructing the *mind*—the spirit—as to the unseen mysteries of our most holy faith. So far as a symbolical character is assigned to ritualistic practices, they must be regarded as addressing themselves, not only to the affections, but to the understanding; and, under this aspect, I think, we may become conscious of a special danger attaching to them. There are, no doubt, very many devout persons, who cling with the most ardent faith to the belief of Christian mysteries, who would yet instinctively shrink from any attempt to represent those mysteries by outward actions or forms. They feel how indefinite—how vague—all such teaching must necessarily be, how grievously liable to misconception, how prone to debase—to materialize—our apprehensions of those holy truths which are so precious to us, yet so far removed from the sphere of visible and earthly things, as to seem to be utterly incapable, except at the cost both of

truth and of reverence, of being interpreted by any external symbols.

More especially in respect of that highest act of Christian worship, on which ritual delights to concentrate itself, how much is there not which we firmly believe—which we profoundly cherish—respecting which, however, the soul must ever turn her glance inward and upward, hearkening to the teaching of the Spirit through the spirit, abstracted, as far as may be, from all external impressions, save those which are to be derived from the calm—solemn—well-ordered words, which would meekly lead her on into the unseen presence of the Great High Priest, and instruct her, in lowly faith and penitence, to await from His hands those ineffable gifts, which she can receive indeed but cannot understand, respecting the nature of which the teaching even of the spirit is conveyed with awe-stricken reserve and hesitancy, and concerning which she surely does not well to lean upon the lower teaching which external forms would proffer.

It is impossible, within the limits which it is requisite to observe on this occasion, to attempt even a brief survey of the movement which has of late excited so much interest—so much painful anxiety—in the mother country. I think that we may congratulate ourselves on the charitable—yet decided—tone, which has been adopted by both

Houses of Convocation, as well as by the Primate in his individual capacity, in respect whether of practices which are obvious transgressions of the law of the Church, or of the revival of usages discontinued, by all but universal custom, for nearly three centuries. It is clear, in both these cases, that the Church, which alone "has power to ordain rites and ceremonies," must take the initiative, if any change be desirable, whether by introducing new or by reviving old usages; and that, as individuals, we can have no right to attempt either the one or the other. No reasonable doubt, as I conceive, can be entertained of the unlawfulness *in foro conscientiæ*, of introducing, on our own responsibility, as ministers of the Church, any of these practices, whether they may prove to be, by the ruling of ecclesiastical courts, permissible or otherwise.

It has, further, been alleged that these changes are *expedient*—that the laity call for them—that they awaken interest and devout feeling among persons, whether in the higher or lower ranks of life, who have hitherto been buried in worldliness or in unbelief. This may in some places have appeared to be the case; but I trust far more to the testimony of many of our Bishops and Clergy, of every shade of opinion, when they express, as they did in convocation, their strong apprehension of a very different result—of a violent Puritan reaction,

availing itself of this new movement to destroy, if possible, that decent and devout order in public worship which our Church undoubtedly prescribes, and to which we have been, of late years, happily returning. I greatly question, moreover, the wholesome and permanent character of any impression which extreme ritual may, in some instances, have made. Men may for a time be captivated by the novelty of religious spectacles; even the thoughtless and depraved may dream for a while that they have at last found the true antidote to indifference or to sinful self-indulgence. We must, however, wait for a time to see the real —the broad—issue, and we *have* seen, again and again—in instances very like, though very unlike, the present—how little dependence is to be placed on profound impressions, made by an appeal through the bodily senses to the passions and affections of the soul.

But the argument from expediency is one to which, however plausible it might be, I should be little inclined to listen. In matters of so high moment we must ask ourselves what is *right*. My belief is that here, as elsewhere, we must learn to "endure as seeing Him who is invisible"—to trust to the unseen power of God working, according to His promise, within His Church, and so seek to win men to Him chiefly by the use of those means which Apostles both employed and prescribed—by

addressing ourselves to the understanding and to the conscience. It is well worthy of note that, when St. Paul describes the unbeliever or the unlearned as "convinced of all," as "judged of all," as "falling down on his face" in the Christian assembly and "worshipping God, and confessing that God is in them of a truth," he ascribes this great result, not to the display of miraculous powers, arresting the senses and overpowering the imagination, but to the exercise of the gift of prophecy—of Christian teaching, that least notable of all gifts, that still small voice, heard then, and ever since heard, though under altered conditions, within the Church of God, by those whose hearts God opens.

The natural man—the psychic—may be enthralled by the captivations of a splendid ritual; he may be devoted, as he thinks, to the service of God, and yet the impression may extend no further than to the sensitive soul; the very semblance of devotion may lull him into a fatal neglect of the higher service of the spirit; he may be taught to withdraw his soul from the guidance of the highest constituent portion of his nature, and to seek a knowledge of the things of the Spirit rather from earth than from above. External service, which should have been interposed as a sheltering veil between him and the disturbing glare of the world, being advanced beyond its proper station, and

being suffered to usurp too high a function, may effect the widely different result of excluding from his view the pure and holy light of heaven.

I referred just now to the danger that the present movement might not only retard—but undo—the blessed work which has for some years been going on both in England and amongst ourselves, in the way of restoring that decent order of worship which our Church prescribes. If such a result is to be apprehended at home, there is tenfold reason to apprehend it here. Let us strive with all solicitude and diligence that this great evil may be averted. Extremes are ever dangerous; truth and virtue and piety are not to be attained by abandoning ourselves to the exclusive guidance of any one intellectual conclusion or moral rule, of any single religious dogma or devout impulse; but by the patient and self-denying endeavour to adjust diversified and, as it may appear, conflicting claims, whether upon our belief or upon our practice.

I have attempted to shew that the service of the body may be exaggerated—thrust into undue prominence—entrusted with functions not its own. Need I remind you that it may be utterly and sinfully neglected? In a new country, where the public service of Almighty God is of necessity, in the vast majority of instances, commenced under very serious disadvantages, in places most unfit for its

celebration, and without any of those external decencies, which, within their own narrow limits, school the thoughtless heart to reverence, there is a grievous danger that men may utterly forget and disallow the necessary service of the body. Yet such a service there is beyond all question, and it is not with any one of us a light matter whether we render it or no. No man, woman, or child, who is physically capable of bending the knee in prayer, can be absolved from the religious obligation of adopting that posture which the example of our Blessed Lord Himself has commended to us, and which our Church expressly enjoins. If we *can* kneel, then, where that posture has been prescribed, it is useless to dream of offering acceptable prayer to Almighty God in any other posture; it is useless to dream that we do not dishonour and offend Him by refusing to "worship and *fall down*." And so with every other detail of outward conduct by which reverence and godly fear are indicated. A solemn—thoughtful—approach to the house of God, silent prayer on entering it, a reverential government of the countenance—the bodily gestures—the whole deportment, all this cannot be dispensed with. And, again, we owe to the Almighty—to our fellow-worshippers—to ourselves—an active and devout participation in the service. We must make what we call our Common Prayer, to be common prayer,

by joining in it—and by joining in it audibly, with "humble voice" as well as with "pure heart;" we must strive to be governed throughout by the solemnizing remembrance that God is with us, beholding our every act—our every glance, and hearing our every word.

If our bodily service were offered under this remembrance, our worship would no longer be open to the reproach of being frigid—lifeless—slovenly; feeling ourselves the consciousness of the presence of Almighty God, we should instruct the thoughtless—the irreligious—to feel it also; we should be doing all that external service can do to withdraw the veil which hides from the carnal mind the apprehension of things unseen. Our Church has given us plain and clear instructions, which no man can possibly mistake; and it is by acting obediently and lovingly in accordance with the rule which she prescribes, that we shall, as individuals, best secure our Communion from any dangerous excess of ritual; while we shall, most assuredly, be removing out of our own path one very serious hindrance to our enjoying the blessing of those who worship God "in spirit and in truth."

One caution remains. We deeply need meek and fervent charity in regard of the subject on which I have ventured to address you. If we *are* agreed on general principles, we may still differ as to minor details. Men's minds are not all cast

in the self-same mould. One man is reserved and introspective, another is more demonstrative; one man feels deeply, but is very slow to discover what he feels, by any outward sign, either before God or man; with another not to discover feeling is not to feel at all; and, accordingly, one man will—and must—interpret very differently from another the *measure* of bodily service which it becomes him to render to Almighty God.

While then we keep within the rule of our Church (a rule which admits of considerable differences of custom, in respect not only of individual worshippers, but of congregations collectively), let us not provoke one another nor condemn one another; but strive humbly to approve ourselves to God, and lovingly to seek the good of our brethren and the peace of the Church. I cannot enforce this suggestion better than in words lately uttered by a distinguished prelate of our Church.* He says, "The conformation of my mind leads me to be satisfied with the simplest form as being the most productive of devotion, but it is not so with others, and I have no right to make what suits me the law for every body else."

And now, my brethren of the clergy, let us confess that a vast work lies before our Church in

* The Bishop of Oxford. Speech in the Upper House of Convocation.

this country, a work beset with unusual perplexities, embarrassed by most serious hindrances. We must, then, address ourselves to it in a manly, sober, patient spirit—in a spirit of courage and self-denial—in the fear of God and in the love of man; praying Him, who is the great object of our worship, to teach us to worship Him in spirit and in truth—to offer to Him, in its due harmony, in its fitting proportions, the service of spirit, soul, and body; to give us a right judgment in all things; to save us from blindly or wilfully surrendering ourselves to those strong currents of opinion, which are ever setting in towards one extreme or another, wasting their strength in alternate deviations to the right hand and to the left; and to enable us steadily to keep, for our little time, that middle course, in which we may most surely and safely advance his blessed purposes, serving truly and faithfully, under our Great Head, "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."