

Sermon 4. Shrinking from Christ's Coming †

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"Thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty: they shall behold the land that is very far off." Isaiah xxxiii. 17.

BEFORE Christ came, the faithful remnant of Israel were consoled with the promise that "their eyes should see" Him, who was to be their "salvation." "Unto you that fear My Name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings." Yet it is observable that the prophecy, though cheering and encouraging, had with it something of an awful character too. First, it was said, "The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His Temple, even the messenger of the Covenant whom ye delight in." Yet it is soon added, "But who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth? for He is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap." [Mal. iv. 2; iii. 1, 2.]

The same mixture of fear with comfort is found in the Disciples after His Resurrection. The women departed from the sepulchre "with fear and great joy." {47} They "trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man, for they were afraid." The Apostles "were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit." "They believed not for joy, and wondered." And our Lord said to them, "Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts?" On another occasion, "None of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord." [Matt. xxviii. 8. Mark xvi. 8. Luke xxiv. 37, 38. John xxi. 12.] It might be from slowness to believe, or from misconception, or from the mere perplexity of amazement, but so it was; they exulted and they were awed.

Still more remarkable is the account of our Lord's appearance to St. John in the Book of Revelation; more remarkable because St. John had no doubt or perplexity. Christ had ascended; the Apostle had received the gift of the Holy Ghost; yet he "fell at His feet as dead."

This reflection leads us on to a parallel thought concerning the state and prospects of all Christians in every age. We too are looking out for Christ's coming,—we are bid look out,—we are bid pray for it; and yet it is to be a time of judgment. It is to be the deliverance of all Saints from sin and sorrow for ever; yet they, every one of them, must undergo an awful trial. How then can any look forward to it with joy, not knowing (for no one knows) the certainty of his own salvation? And the difficulty is increased when we come to pray for it,—to pray for its coming soon: how can we pray that Christ would come, that the day of {48} judgment would hasten, that His kingdom would come, that His kingdom may be at once,—may come on us this day or tomorrow,—when by so coming He would be shortening the time of our present life, and cut off those precious years given us for conversion, amendment, repentance and sanctification? Is there not an inconsistency in professing to wish our Judge already come, when we do not feel ourselves ready for Him? In what sense can we really and heartily pray that He would cut short the time, when our conscience tells us that, even were our life longest, we should have much to do in a few years?

I do not deny that there is some difficulty in the question, but surely not more so than there is on every side of us in religious matters. Religion has (as it were) its very life in what are paradoxes and contradictions in the eye of reason. It is a seeming inconsistency how we

can pray for Christ's coming, yet wish time to "work out our salvation," and "make our calling and election sure." It was a seeming contradiction, how good men were to desire His first coming, yet be unable to abide it; how the Apostles feared, yet rejoiced after His resurrection. And so it is a paradox how the Christian should in all things be sorrowful yet always rejoicing, and dying yet living, and having nothing yet possessing all things. Such seeming contradictions arise from the want of depth in our minds to master the whole truth. We have not eyes keen enough to follow out the lines of God's providence and will, which meet at length, though at first sight they seem parallel.

I will now try to explain how these opposite duties {49} of fearing yet praying to have the sight of Christ are not necessarily inconsistent with each other. Why we should fear it, is not strange. Surely when a man gets himself steadily to contemplate a state of things beyond this life, he is in the way to be overpowered by the thoughts which throng upon him. How dreadful to the imagination is every scene of that unknown hereafter! This life indeed is full of dangers and pains, but we know what they are like; we do not know what shall be in the world to come. "Lord, whither goest Thou?" said the Apostles; "we know not whither Thou goest." Supposing a man told that he should suddenly be carried off to some unknown globe in the heavens,—this is the kind of trouble in its least fearful shape, which the future presents, when dwelt upon. And still more trying is the peculiar prospect which presents itself of Christ's coming in judgment. What a prospect, to be judged for all our doings by an unerring Judge. Try to trace back the history of your life in memory, and fancy every part of it confessed by you in words, put into words before some intimate friend, how great would be your shame! but how gladly would you in that day resign yourself to a disclosure to a fellow-sinner, how gladly to a disclosure to a world of sinners, compared with the presence of an All-holy, All-seeing Creator with His eyes upon you, "beholding you," as the gospel speaks of Him in the days of His flesh,—and one deed of evil after another told forth, while all your best actions and best qualities fade away and become as discoloured and unsightly as if there were nothing good in them; and you the while uncertain {50} how the decision shall be. I do not presume to say that all this will happen in detail; but this is what is meant by a judgment in the earthly sense of the word, and that awful trial is surely not called a judgment for nothing, but that we may gain some ideas from it. Think of all this, and you will not deny that the thought of standing before Christ is enough to make us tremble. And yet His presence is held out to us by Himself as the greatest of goods; all Christians are bound to pray for it, to pray for its hastening; to pray that we may speedily look on Him whom none can see "without holiness," none but "the pure in heart;"—and now the question is, How can we pray for it with sincerity?

1. Now first, though we could not at all reconcile our feelings about ourselves with the command given us, still it is our duty to obey the latter on faith. If Abraham could lift up his knife to slay his son, we may well so far subdue our fears as to pray for what nevertheless is terrible. Job said, "Though he slay me, yet I will trust in him." Under all circumstances surely, we may calmly resign ourselves into His hands. Can we suppose that He would deceive us? deal unkindly or hardly with us? Can He make use of us, if I may say so, against ourselves? Let us not so think of the most merciful Lord. Let us do what He bids, and leave the rest to Him. Thus, I say, we might reason with ourselves, if nothing else could be said.

2. But next, I observe, that when we pray for the coming of Christ, we do but pray in the Church's words, {51} that He would "*accomplish the number* of his elect and would hasten His kingdom." That is, we do not pray that He would simply cut short the world, but, so to express myself, that He would make time go quicker, and the wheels of His chariot speed on.

Before He comes, a certain space must be gone over; all the Saints must be gathered in; and each Saint must be matured. Not a grain must fall to the ground; not an ear of corn must lose its due rain and sunshine. All we pray is, that He would please to crowd all this into a short space of time; that He would "finish the work and cut it short *in righteousness*," and "make a short work upon the earth;" that He would accomplish,—not curtail, but fulfil,—the circle of His Saints, and hasten the age to come without disordering this. Indeed it cannot be otherwise. All God's works are in place and season; they are all complete. As in nature, the structure of its minutest portions is wrought out to perfection, and an insect is as wonderful as Leviathan; so, when in His providence He seems to hurry, He still keeps time, and moves upon the deep harmonies of truth and love. When then we pray that He would come, we pray also that we may be ready; that all things may converge and meet in Him; that He may draw us while He draws near us, and makes us the holier the closer He comes. We pray that we may not fear that which at present we justly do fear "that when He shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming." [1 John ii. 28.] He can condense into an hour a life of trial. He who frames {52} the worlds in a moment, and creates generations by the breath of His mouth, and melts, and hardens, and deluges, and dries up the solid rocks in a day, and makes bones to live, grow, and die, and buries them in the earth, and changes them into stone, apart from time and at His mere will, more wondrously can He deal with the world of spirits, who are never subject to the accidents of matter. He can by one keen pang of agony punish the earthly soul, or by one temptation justify it, or by one vision glorify it. Adam fell in a moment; Abraham was justified upon his seizing the knife; Moses lost Canaan for a word; David said, "I have sinned," and was forgiven; Solomon gained wisdom in a dream; Peter made one confession and received the keys; our Lord baffled Satan in three sentences; He redeemed us in the course of a day; He regenerates us by a form of words. We know not how "fearfully and wonderfully" our souls "are made." To men in sleep, in drowning, or in excitement, moments are as years. They suddenly become other men, nature or grace dispensing with time.

3. But again, you say, How can I pray to see Christ, who am so unclean? You say well that you are unclean. But in what time do you propose to become otherwise? Do you expect in this life ever to be clean? Yes, in one sense, by the presence of the Holy Ghost within you; but that presence we trust you have now. But if by "clean," you mean free from that infection of nature, the least drop of which is sufficient to dishonour all your services, clean you never will be till you have paid the debt of sin, and lose that body which {53} Adam has begotten. Be sure that the longer you live, and the holier you become, you will only perceive that misery more clearly. The less of it you have, the more it will oppress you; its full draught does but confuse and stupify you; as you come to yourself, your misery begins. The more your soul becomes one with Him who deigns to dwell within it, the more it sees with His eyes. You dare not pray for His presence now;—would you pray for it had you lived Methuselah's years? I trow not. You will never be good enough to desire it; no one in the whole Church prays for it except on conditions implied. To the end of the longest life you are still a beginner. What Christ asks of you is not sinlessness, but diligence. Had you lived ten times your present age, ten times more service would be required of you. Every day you live longer, more will be required. If He were to come today, you would be judged up to today. Did He come tomorrow, you would be judged up to tomorrow. Were the time put off a year, you would have a year more to answer for. You cannot elude your destiny, you cannot get rid of your talent; you are to answer for your opportunities, whatever they may be, not more nor less. You cannot be profitable to Him even with the longest life; you can show faith and love in an hour. True it is, if you have turned from Him, and served sin, and in proportion as you have done this, you have a great work before you,—to undo what you have done. If you have

given years to Satan, you have a double duty, to repent as well as to work; but even then you may pray without dread; for in praying {54} for His presence you still are praying, as I have said, to be ready for it.

4. But once more. You ask, how you can make up your mind to stand before your Lord and God; I ask in turn, how do you bring yourself to come before Him now day by day?—for what is this but meeting Him? Consider what it is you mean by praying, and you will see that, at that very time that you are asking for the coming of His kingdom, you are anticipating that coming, and accomplishing the thing you fear. When you pray, you come into His presence. Now reflect on yourself, what your feelings are in coming. They are these: you seem to say,—I am in myself nothing but a sinner, a man of unclean lips and earthly heart. I am not worthy to enter into His presence. I am not worthy of the least of all His mercies. I know He is All-holy, yet I come before Him; I place myself under His pure and piercing eyes, which look me through and through, and discern every trace and every motion of evil within me. Why do I do so? First of all, for this reason. To whom should I go? What can I do better? Who is there in the whole world that can help me? Who that will care for me, or pity me, or have any kind thought of me, if I cannot obtain it of Him? I know He is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity; but I know again that He is All-merciful, and that He so sincerely desires my salvation that He has died for me. Therefore, though I am in a great strait, I will rather fall into His hands, than into those of any creature. True it is I could find creatures more like myself, imperfect or sinful: it might seem better to betake {55} myself to some of these who have power with God, and to beseech them to interest themselves for me. But no; somehow I cannot content myself with this;—no, terrible as it is, I had rather go to God alone. I have an instinct within me which leads me to rise and go to my Father, to name the Name of His well-beloved Son, and having named it, to place myself unreservedly in His hands, saying, "If Thou, Lord, wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, who may abide it! But there is forgiveness with Thee."—This is the feeling in which we come to confess our sins, and to pray to God for pardon and grace day by day; and observe, it is the very feeling in which we must prepare to meet Him when He comes visibly. Why, even children of this world can meet a judicial process and a violent death with firmness. I do not say that we must have aught of their pride or their self-trusting tranquillity. And yet there is a certain composure and dignity which become us who are born of immortal seed, when we come before our Father. If indeed we have habitually lived to the world, then truly it is natural we should attempt to fly from Him whom we have pierced. Then may we well call on the mountains to fall on us, and on the hills to cover us. But if we have lived, however imperfectly, yet habitually, in His fear, if we trust that His Spirit is in us, then we need not be ashamed before Him. We shall then come before Him, as now we come to pray—with profound abasement, with awe, with self-renunciation, still as relying upon the Spirit which He has given us, with our faculties about us, with a collected and determined mind, and with hope. {56} He who cannot pray for Christ's coming, ought not in consistency to pray at all.

I have spoken of coming to God in prayer generally; but if this is awful, much more is coming to Him in the Sacrament of Holy Communion; for this is in very form an anticipation of His coming, a near presence of Him in earnest of it. And a number of men feel it to be so; for, for one reason or another, they never come before Him in that most Holy Ordinance, and so deprive themselves of the highest of blessings here below. Thus their feeling is much the same as theirs would be, who from fear of His coming, did not dare look out for it. They indeed who are in the religious practice of communicating, understand well enough how it is possible to feel afraid and yet to come. Surely it is possible, and the case is the same as regards the future day of Christ. You must tremble, and yet pray for it. We have all of us

experienced enough even of this life, to know that the same seasons are often most joyful and also most painful. Instances of this must suggest themselves to all men. Consider the loss of friends, and say whether joy and grief, triumph and humiliation, are not strangely mingled, yet both really preserved. The joy does not change the grief, nor the grief the joy, into some third feeling; they are incommunicable with each other, both remain, both affect us. Or consider the mingled feelings with which a son obtains forgiveness of a father,—the soothing thought that all displeasure is at an end, the veneration, the love, and all the undescribable emotions, most pleasurable, which cannot be put into words,—yet his bitterness against himself. {57} Such is the temper in which we desire to come to the Lord's table; such in which we must pray for His coming; such in which His elect will stand before Him when He comes.

5. Lastly, let me say more distinctly what I have already alluded to, that in that solemn hour we shall have, if we be His, the inward support of His Spirit too, carrying us on towards Him, and "witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God." God is mysteriously threefold; and while He remains in the highest heaven, He comes to judge the world;—and while He judges the world, He is in us also, bearing us up and going forth in us to meet Himself. God the Son is without, but God the Spirit is within,—and when the Son asks, the Spirit will answer. That Spirit is vouchsafed to us here; and if we yield ourselves to His gracious influences, so that He draws up our thoughts and wills to heavenly things, and becomes one with us, He will assuredly be still in us and give us confidence at the Day of Judgment. He will be with us, and strengthen us; and how great His strength is, what mind of man can conceive? Gifted with that supernatural strength, we may be able to lift up our eyes to our Judge when He looks on us, and look on Him in turn, though with deep awe, yet without confusion of face, as if in the consciousness of innocence.

That hour must come at length upon every one of us. When it comes, may the countenance of the Most Holy quicken, not consume us; may the flame of judgment be to us only what it was to the Three Holy Children, over whom the fire had no power!