

A DISCOURSE

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A Discourse by Richard S. Storrs & George W. Bethune

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RICHARD S. STORRS & GEORGE W. BETHUNE

A DISCOURSE



Geo. W. Bethune

A DISCOURSE

365702
COMMEMORATIVE OF

GEORGE W. BETHUNE, D. D.

DELIVERED IN THE

REFORMED CHURCH ON THE HEIGHTS,

BROOKLYN, N. Y.,

FEBRUARY 8TH, 1891.

BY RICHARD S. STORRS, D. D.

1891.

(PRINTED FOR PRIVATE DISTRIBUTION.)

DISCOURSE.

MY CHRISTIAN FRIENDS:

It is for many reasons a delightful service to which, through your Pastor, you have invited me. Yet in some respects it is a difficult service, from which I should shrink if I were not assured of the welcoming attention of those here assembled, especially of those who knew and honored Dr. Bethune in his life among us. So rapid is the progress of years, so full of change in the city and the country have the last thirty years pre-eminently been, that the name and fame once familiar to all of us, which for nine years had shed lustre upon Brooklyn, and in which its citizens had had common pride, have now become to multitudes here a vanishing remembrance, to the younger among us a shadowy tradition. I confess to a certain startled surprise in my own mind, when I remember that it lacks but a few days of thirty-two years

since I bade him good-bye in the adjoining house, as he was leaving for Europe on that voyage from which he never returned to the pastorate of this church. Even now, I can hardly make it real to my thought that the preceding years of his earnest and eloquent ministry among us had belonged to the period of a former generation. His appearance, gesture, voice, his entire remarkable personality, are so distinctly before me as I stand in this pulpit, built for him, and to which he first gave distinction, that he seems almost visibly present; and yet I know that the present honored Pastor of this church is the sixth in succession following him, and that very few of the families now here can have had direct personal experience of his fervor in preaching, or of his faithful pastoral care. I can only, therefore, go back in thought, over the long and crowded interval, and ask you to go with me, while I testify sincerely, though very imperfectly, to the qualities of him whom we commemorate, and to the impression which he naturally left, without effort to make it, on those who were once familiar with him.

Among these I may, without egotism, reckon myself. Dr. Bethune came to the city, unless my memory misleads me, in the late summer of

1849. I had been here already for nearly three years, was familiar, of course, with his high reputation as a scholar, a poet, an impressive preacher, an orator before learned societies, and a platform speaker of unsurpassed eloquence, though I had not happened personally to meet him. I called upon him at once, at the hotel where he was transiently staying, and was received by him with a cordial greeting the remembrance of which yet warms my heart. The church on Henry street, in which he subsequently preached till this one was ready, was near my own. This church, erected a year or two later, was nearer still. We lived in close neighborhood, not unfrequently exchanged pulpits, for a time conducted union services on Sunday evenings, in connection with Dr. S. H. Cox, who was then here in the uneclipsed brilliance of his extraordinary power; and we met often in free social intercourse, as well as on formal public occasions. Two courses of public lectures were delivered by us, in alliance with Dr. Francis Vinton, then the eminent Rector of Grace Church in this city; and out of these courses, with the consequent personal fellowship of the lecturers, grew a private club, consisting of eighteen or twenty gentlemen, meeting

weekly at one another's houses, whose meetings were maintained till after Dr. Bethune's departure from the city, and the memory of which is still vivid and fragrant with those who survive. Of all the members of that club, I believe that only our honored fellow-citizen Mr. Silliman, with Mr. Daniel Huntington of New York, and myself, remain among the living. Neither of us has forgotten, I am sure, the wit and wisdom, the various learning, the genial humor, the courteousness of manner, the moral earnestness when occasion required, which were brought to those meetings by Dr. Bethune. It was to me, as one of the youngest and least important of the members of the circle, a true education, in which I delighted, which I shall not forget till all things earthly shall have vanished from my thought.

This is not an occasion, however, for particular personal reminiscences of him whom we commemorate, however inviting that office might be. It calls, rather, for a fair though an affectionate estimate of what he was, and of what he did, as a man set in public relations, during the term of his pastorate here; and of this I shall speak, briefly but earnestly, not chiefly for his honor, but for the honor and praise of Him

whom he worshiped and served, and to whom he always humbly attributed whatever of grace and power he possessed, whatever use of large opportunity it fell to him to make.

When Dr. Bethune came to Brooklyn he was in the fullness of power and experience; with a mind enriched by repeated extensive travels in Europe, by careful study, and by familiar contact with distinguished and cultivated circles; with a fame, too, already national in its reach. He was forty-four years of age, full of physical as well as intellectual vigor, able to assume many labors, to undergo exceptional fatigues, and to minister to others from the abounding fullness of his strength. He had had an experience in the work of the ministry the variety of which was unequalled, I am sure, in the case of any of us who thenceforth became his neighbors. He had preached to the colored people at Savannah, to their great delight, and, as they felt, to their remarkable spiritual profit. He had been Chaplain there in the Seamen's Bethel, and other preachers had seemed to his hearers "land-lubbers" in comparison. He had preached to the lumbermen in the Maine woods, and to those along the banks of the St. Lawrence; and they were always eager to have him come, and