

SERMONS

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Sermons by Various

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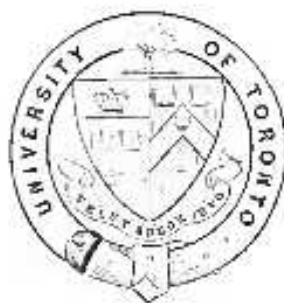
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VARIOUS

SERMONS



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'No Continuing City.'

A SERMON FOR THE DISILLUSIONED.

PREACHED BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY,

Advent Sunday, 1891,

BY THE

REV. H. J. BIDDER, B.D.,

FELLOW AND FORMERLY TUTOR OF ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE,
AND VICAR OF ST. GILES', OXFORD.

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'No Continuing City.'

HEB. xiii., 14.

'Here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.'

THERE is this about the lives and histories recorded in Holy Scripture, that they are made the occasion for illustrating and expressing spiritual principles, which, just because they are truly spiritual, are of universal and eternal application. Thus it is that the writers of the New Testament again and again refer to the events and characters of the Old Dispensation,—not for the sake of elucidating facts, not for their merely historical interest, but on account of their spiritual significance; and whether the record was accurate, contemporaneous, authentic, or the more or less poetic redaction of a later age was a question which it never occurred to them to ask, and which could in no way affect their use and practice in the matter. This method of using the Scriptures is no doubt capable of abuse, and was, as we know, grossly and absurdly abused in the artificial system of allegorical interpretation, which later on took the place of that really spiritual insight into history which we find in the writings of S. Paul, or in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In spite, however, of all the follies and extravagances for which it has been made the excuse, the same method of spiritual interpretation must still be pursued by any one who would use, either for himself or for others, what is written for our learning, and thence draw lessons of patience and steadfast faith.

In the familiar passage from which we have taken our text the writer has been unfolding a lesson of this kind for those Jewish believers in our Saviour whose faith had hitherto been wrapped up and clothed in Jewish forms, and who now stood aghast and despairing when they beheld their Holy City destroyed, and the law, the priesthood—all they held most sacred—fast vanishing from their sight. They had pinned their faith, we might almost say, upon the stability of the Old Dispensation, and upon that message of God in the past to their fathers, of which Jerusalem and Jerusalem's worship were the outward pledge and embodiment. Our apostolic writer, however, tells them that all this stability and permanence was only illusory: it had survived no doubt many revolutions, many disasters; it had evinced a quite remarkable vitality and fixedness of tenure. But these qualities were only accidental and misleading: the true note of God's service is not permanence, but pilgrimage; on earth, at any rate, the highest end of man is the pursuit, and not the enjoyment, of Rest, 'for here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.'

This morning our endeavour shall be to apply the same lesson to ourselves in view of those trials and alarms which more especially beset Christian people to-day, under the belief that what this writer said of the material temple and city of Jerusalem is equally true of those intellectual and spiritual structures in which the human soul has housed itself from time to time during the course of its pilgrimage. Often these houses have seemed so secure that it has grown to think that they will continue for ever, to look upon them as its only and its final home; and when, as in the present generation, these are rudely shaken, some there are who are ready to bury themselves in the ruins of the past, whilst there are many more ready to cry 'who will any longer shew us any good?'

Now, to a great extent, Disillusionment is a characteristic common to every age, just as it is a phenomenon incidental to the path and progress of all knowledge. On the one hand it is of the very nature of Science to form theories in which to sum up and express the results of past discovery, and, on the other hand, just because in all Science we only know in part, the advent of fuller knowledge is ever doing away with and superseding the old. So it is also with the social and political history of different races. For generation after generation they grow and flourish beneath the shadow of their respective Beliefs and Institutions until these seem the necessary and unchanging conditions of their existence; but sooner or later an era of change arrives, as it came to the Feudal System, as it came to Monarchy, as it will also surely come to Democracy, and what once seemed perfect, salutary, permanent, is found to 'wax old and ready to vanish away.' There are many questions of this kind being agitated at the present day in newspapers, books, and magazines, in the club and the workshop; they relate to the State, to the family, to trade and to commerce; and with these we are not called upon to deal from this place. But there is also (who can shut his eyes to it?) another sphere which touches us more closely as Christian men and women, and upon which it may not be out of place to offer some counsel, or, at any rate, some reflections.

In the first place, we must observe that whether the Disillusionment be justifiable or not, whether it be well grounded or due to caprice, yet the fact remains that in the religious world a general sense of Disillusionment does prevail. The common run of men and women do not yield the same unquestioning respect to the traditional beliefs and traditional restraints which have controlled the past. They regard these as open to discussion and criticism, even if not as already discredited. They

allow themselves a latitude, both of speech and conduct, in respect of them, at which our fathers would have shuddered. To take only the two fundamental constituents of our religious life, the Bible and the Church, it is only the blindest fatuity which can ignore the change that has come over our views and estimate of their authority. Biblical criticism has usurped so large a measure of attention, it has dazzled the reading public with such startling, if not brilliant, conclusions, that the *Holy* character of God's Word is in danger of being forgotten or denied; and any one who really takes the trouble to get into touch with his fellow-men, educated and half-educated, and honestly tries to gauge their opinion, must, I think, admit that the views hitherto formulated and current concerning the Church and the Ministry, concerning the efficacy of Ecclesiastical rites and sacraments, are no longer really believed, even though they may still form the rallying cry of partizans.

The claims of the Church in the past have been definite enough,—to be a supernatural channel of grace and a store-house of merit which her ministers can alone dispense; and they in turn have not been slow to claim for themselves a corresponding character. They have appealed to their office and to the mode of their Ordination as a proof of the truth and authority of their doctrines, and for the efficacy of their ministrations. Even when they have appealed to reason and argument it has been as those who would seethe the kid in its mother's milk, with a view to put Reason to silence and tune the voice of Conscience to that Authority which they claim to represent. And, however plausibly these claims may be disguised, they are not altogether unknown in our own Church, and in our own day. So desperate, however, have become their chances, that the maintainers of ecclesiastical authority and tradition are found ready to make the wildest sacrifices,