

**A DISCOURSE, COMMEMORATIVE OF
THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF THE REV.
JAMES MAY, D. D., LATE PROFESSOR
OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY IN THE
DIVINITY SCHOOL OF THE PROTESTANT
EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA**

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A discourse, commemorative of the life and character of the rev. James May, D. D., late professor of ecclesiastical history in the Divinity school of the Protestant Episcopal church in Philadelphia by John S. Stone

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DELIVERED IN THE CHURCH OF THE EPIPHANY,

BY THE

REV. JOHN S. STONE, D. D.,

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DISCOURSE, &C.

It is the duty of the Church to commemorate her sainted dead. Personal eulogy she must withhold; and the flattery of mere human praise, if it could issue from Her anointed lips, would be but a sullyng breath, both to herself and to the object of her adulation.

But, truly to commemorate is not vainly to flatter those whom God hath called, and justified, sanctified and glorified. Such commemoration is no more than the sacred duty of preserving the history of His dealings with His Church, in His rich grace by Christ Jesus, and in His marvelous power by the Holy Ghost. It is but the needful task of embalming in the perennial transparency of her records—something better than the story of her dissensions—the memory of those whom God hath regenerated and trained to the higher life of the Spirit by the ministry of His Word. Such commemoration is needful, that the Church may be seen, not only to be truly alive in the palpable realities of the momentary present, and a candidate for truer and fuller life in the limitless future, but also to have been thus living throughout the varied changes of the hoary past, as the current of that life has streamed down from its first ancient

opening in the Fountain of Redemption : the Catholic, live Fellowship of the holy in all ages, in which

“ Angels and living saints and dead
But one communion make ;
All join in Christ, their vital head,
And of His love partake.”

In the spirit of these sentiments, I have been called to commemorate the life and character of one, who was recently living and moving among us in all the quiet sweetness, yet busy power, of a most sanctified life. It is not mere affectation to say that I have a profound sense of incompetency to the task which has been assigned me, and would fain devolve the work on better hands and holier lips. The sources, however, from which the call to this duty has come, leave me not at liberty to decline the labor which is laid on me ; and I can sincerely say that, so far as my ability for it has reached, I have found it a labor of the most grateful kind.

In performing this labor, I have not seen how I could do better than to give a simple narrative of the leading events in the life, and as simple a delineation of the prominent traits in the character of him who is to be the subject of this discourse.

I.—James May, the fourth son of Robert May and Ruth Potts, was born on the first day of October, 1805, on the romantic banks of French Creek, in the beautiful hill-country of South Coventry, Chester county, Pennsylvania. His mother, of the ancient Potts family of Pottstown, Montgomery county, was a sincerely pious lady, and his father, a man of serious and grave character, of singular prudence, sound judgment and great integrity, had extensive business connections for many years in the iron trade of this state. He was killed by a fall

from his horse when the subject of this notice was but seven years old.

Of his worthy kindred, however, I must speak but briefly: yet, it is no more than an act of piety to the Church to drop one word to the memory of an elder brother. Thomas Potts May was a young man of high promise, for uncommon ability, remarkable piety and early eloquence. He entered the ministry of our Church, and was settled in St. John's Church, Norristown, as successor to the late Dr. Bird Wilson; having charge, at the same time, of St. Thomas' Church, Whitemarsh. He afterwards preached in St. Paul's, Philadelphia; but after a brief visit returned to Norristown, developed yellow fever, and died there in 1819. Alas! what possibilities of usefulness in the Church and of glory to God vanished from human view, when that fragrant and beautiful flower, rather than rich and ripening fruit was plucked! Thank God! It was not plucked for waste, but for perfecting, far beyond human view.

James received his rudimentary education in the neighborhood of his native home, but some time after his father's death, which happened in 1812, he was sent to Norristown, where he enjoyed the pleasure and reaped the benefit of a residence in the family of his brother Thomas, and at the same time commenced the study of the Roman and Greek Classics under Mr. Barr, then principal of the Norristown Academy. His residence and course of study here were terminated only by the death of his long and patiently suffering mother in 1819.

Thus fatherless and motherless, his native Coventry again received the youthful orphan, and gave him, amid its romantic scenery, free room and some time to grow both in body and in mind. I say, some time to grow, for

it was not until in 1821 that he went to live with a sister, the wife of the then Ex-Governor Stevens of Maryland, residing in Talbot county on the eastern shore. There, under the care of Dr. Alexander Campbell, an eminent Presbyterian divine, he spent another year in Classical and Mathematical studies, preparatory to entrance on his short, but, to him and the Church, eventful college life.

Such is the sum of what has come to us of the childhood and youth of James May. What more was included for him, in these the most important years of every life, we cannot be said to know. We can say, however, that in those years, as in a delicate and swelling bud of hope, lay wrapped and ready for quickening the germs of the whole future man, morally, intellectually and spiritually, as we and the Church have long known and revered him.

One thing more, indeed, of this opening period may be known by certain inference from what soon followed; that, as a student, he had a mind of excellent powers, and of those powers made an excellent use. With powers of an ordinary grade, and with diligence in an ordinary degree, he could not have entered as he did in the fall of 1822, when only seventeen years of age, the Senior Class of Jefferson College, in Cannonsburg, Washington county of this State; nor, having entered, could he without such strong powers and previous progress have maintained, as he did, a most distinguished rank in his class, not merely for the purity and elevation of his moral character, but also for the strength of his abilities and the depth of his attainments. He graduated in the fall of 1823, sharing the first honor with David H. Riddle, a young man who has since risen to distinction. It was this eminence, intellectual as well as moral, that made him "a great

favorite" with Dr. Matthew Brown, then President of the College; and which led this venerable and appreciative friend to utter the almost fulfilled prophecy, that young "May would yet be a Bishop:" and it was the same eminence which secured the admiration of young Riddle, his generous and equally appreciative competitor for College honors, and which prompted this warm-hearted and life-long friend, as the present President of their common Alma Mater, to write, that James May "was probably more respected and admired than any one in the Class of 1823."

At this point in our narrative we must make a moment's pause. I have said that Mr. May's short college life was eventful both to himself and to the Church. I mean that it was filled with events, which showed—not merely the important stirring of young ambition and the rich conquests of diligent ability, in the matter of human learning, but—the unspeakably more important stirring of the Divine Spirit and the infinitely richer conquests of a Savior's love, in the heart of the young learner. In his one College year Mr. May not only won temporal honors but was born to eternal life. You will understand me as speaking, not of his Baptism and Confirmation, but of that which Baptism signifies, and which Confirmation ratifies. Whatever may have been the earlier Christian nurture which he had received, whether from his parents or from the Church, it was during his one College year that the seeds of Christian instruction, however and whenever implanted, began to germinate; that the hope-bud of his young life, under the quickening power of the Holy Spirit and the living warmth of the Sun of Righteousness, burst into blossom and began to ripen into fruit. Here, within this short season, amid all the din of College-life and all

the diligence of scholarly toil, were going on the secret strivings of the Spirit with that earnest heart; His secret revealings of sin to that honest conscience; His silent quoting, to the faith of that troubled soul, of the Baptist's word of cheer, "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world;" His inner strengthening of that soul's faith in its long, earnest struggle with distressing doubts and fears; and His effectual aids in finally lifting up that deep, dark mourner for sin into the light of a blessed hope, "a good hope through grace," a hope which was but faith coming out of its dark struggle; faith catching the light that beams from the Cross; faith rejoicing at length in the settled assurance that "there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus;" and finally, faith overflowing with that obedient love, which embraces Father, Son and Holy Ghost in the covenant of life eternal.

These characteristic struggles of fear with hope and of doubt with faith in Mr. May's early Christian experience, account for—what his intimate friends could not but occasionally observe, as mingling with his earnest enthusiasm in his Savior's work and with his hearty love for that Savior's person—a pensive sadness, an unrepulsive tinge of melancholy, which made him, though always a Christian of strong, joyful and conquering faith, yet also a uniformly tender, and sometimes even a tearful Christian. That tinge of melancholy was not constitutional. Get into his intimacy and you could see that, behind his flexible features, he had naturally, if not a deep, quiet vein of humor, at least a near kindred to it, in a set of muscles that loved to move, in fine, responsive joyousness, while humor was playing on their strings. That pensive sadness—never seen but by intimates, and