

Maclaren on Micah

Micah 2:7: IS THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD STRAITENED?

'O thou that art named the house of Jacob, is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? Are these His doings?'—
MICAH 2:7

The greater part of so-called Christendom is to-day celebrating the gift of a Divine Spirit to the Church; but it may well be asked whether the religious condition of so-called Christendom is not a sad satire upon Pentecost. There seems a woful contrast, very perplexing to faith, between the bright promise at the beginning and the history of the development in the future. How few of those who share in to-day's services have any personal experience of such a gift! How many seem to think that that old story is only the record of a past event, a transient miracle which has no kind of relation to the experience of the Christians of this day! There were a handful of believers in one of the towns of Asia Minor, to whom an Apostle came, and was so startled at their condition that he put to them in wonder the question that might well be put to multitudes of so-called Christians amongst us: 'Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed?' And their answer is only too true a transcript of the experience of large masses of people who call themselves Christians: 'We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.'

I desire, then, dear brethren, to avail myself of this day's associations in order to press upon your consciences and upon my own some considerations naturally suggested by them, and which find voice in those two indignant questions of the old Prophet:—'Is the Spirit of the Lord straitened?' 'Are these'—the phenomena of existing popular Christianity—'are these His doings?' And if we are brought sharp up against the consciousness of a dreadful contrast, it may do us good to ask what is the explanation of so cloudy a day following a morning so bright.

I. First, then, I have to ask you to think with me of the promise of the Pentecost.

What did it declare and hold forth for the faith of the Church? I need not dwell at any length upon this point. The facts are familiar to you, and the inferences drawn from them are commonplace and known to us all. But let me just enumerate them as briefly as may be.

'Suddenly there came a sound, as of the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared cloven tongues as of fire, and it sat upon each of them; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost.'

What lay in that? First, the promise of a Divine Spirit by symbols which express some, at all events, of the characteristics and wonderfulness of His work. The 'rushing of a mighty wind' spoke of a power which varies in its manifestations from the gentlest breath that scarce moves the leaves on the summer trees to the wildest blast that casts down all which stands in its way.

The natural symbolism of the wind, to popular apprehension the least material of all material forces, and of which the connection with the immaterial part of a man's personality has been expressed in all languages, points to a divine, to an immaterial, to a mighty, to a life-giving power which is free to blow whither it listeth, and of which men can mark the effects, though they are all ignorant of the force itself.

The other symbol of the fiery tongues which parted and sat upon each of them speaks in like manner of the divine influence, not as destructive, but full of quick, rejoicing energy and life, the power to transform and to purify. Whithersoever the fire comes, it changes all things into its own substance. Whithersoever the fire comes, there the ruddy spires shoot upwards towards the heavens. Whithersoever the fire comes, there all bonds and fetters are melted and consumed. And so this fire transforms, purifies, ennobles, quickens, sets free; and where the fiery Spirit is, there are energy, swift life, rejoicing activity, transforming and transmuting power which changes the recipient of the flame into flame himself.

Then, still further, in the fact of Pentecost there is the promise of a Divine Spirit which is to influence all the moral side of humanity. This is the great and glorious distinction between the Christian doctrine of inspiration and all others which have, in heathen lands, partially reached similar conceptions—that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has laid emphasis upon the Holy Spirit, and has declared that holiness of heart is the touchstone and test of all claims of divine inspiration. Gifts are much, graces are more. An inspiration which makes wise is to be coveted, an inspiration which makes holy is transcendently better. There we find the safeguard against all the fanaticisms which have sometimes invaded the Christian Church, namely, in the thought that the Spirit which dwells in men, and makes them free from the obligations of outward law and cold morality, is a Spirit that works a deeper holiness than law dreamed, and a more spontaneous and glad conformity to all things that are fair and good, than any legislation and outward commandment could ever enforce. The Spirit that came at Pentecost is not merely a Spirit of rushing might and of swift-flaming energy, but it is a Spirit of holiness, whose most blessed and intimate work is the production in us of all homely virtues and sweet, unpretending goodnesses which can adorn and gladden humanity.

Still further, the Pentecost carried in it the promise and prophecy of a Spirit granted to all the Church. 'They were all filled with the Holy Ghost.' This is the true democracy of Christianity, that its very basis is laid in the thought that every member of the body is equally close to the Head, and equally recipient of the life. There is none now who has a Spirit which others do not possess. The ancient aspiration of the Jewish law-giver: 'Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them,' is fulfilled in the experience of Pentecost; and the handmaiden and the children, as well as the old men and the servants, receive of that universal gift. Therefore sacerdotal claims, special functions, privileged classes, are alien to the spirit of Christianity, and blasphemies against the inspiring God. If 'one is your Master, all ye are brethren,' and if we have all been made to drink into one Spirit, then no longer hath any man dominion over our faith nor power to intervene and to intercede with God for us.

And still further, the promise of this early history was that of a Spirit which should fill the whole nature of the men to whom He was granted; filling—in the measure, of course, of their receptivity—them as the great sea does all the creeks and indentations along the shore. The deeper the creek, the deeper the water in it; the further inland it runs, the further will the refreshing tide penetrate the bosom of the continent. And so each man, according to his character, stature, circumstances, and all the varying conditions which determine his power of receptivity, will receive a varying measure of that gift. Yet it is meant that all shall be full. The little vessel, the tiny cup, as well as the great cistern and the enormous vat, each contains according to its capacity. And if all are filled, then this quick Spirit must have the power to influence all the provinces of human nature, must touch the moral, must touch the spiritual. The temporary manifestations and extraordinary signs of His power may well drop away as the flower drops when the fruit has set. The operations of the Divine Spirit are to be felt thrilling through all the nature, and every part of the man's being is to be recipient of the power. Just as when you take a candle and plunge it into a jar of oxygen it blazes up, so my poor human nature immersed in that Divine Spirit, baptized in the Holy Ghost, shall flame in all its parts into unsuspected and hitherto inexperienced brightness. Such are the elements of the promise of Pentecost.

II. And now, in the next place, look at the apparent failure of the promise.

'Is the Spirit of the Lord straitened?' Look at Christendom. Look at all the churches. Look at yourselves. Will any one say that the religious condition of any body of professed believers at this moment corresponds to Pentecost? Is not the gap so wide that to fill it up seems almost impossible? Is not the stained and imperfect fulfilment a miserable satire upon the promise? 'If the Lord be with us,' said one of the heroes of ancient Israel, 'wherefore is all this come upon us?' I am sure that we may say the same. If the Lord be with us, what is the meaning of the state of things which we see around us, and must recognise in ourselves? Do any existing churches present the final perfect form of Christianity as embodied in a society? Would not the best thing that could happen, and the thing that will have to happen some day, be the disintegration of the existing organisations in order to build up a more perfect habitation of God through the Spirit? I do not wish to exaggerate. God knows there is no need for exaggerating. The plain, unvarnished story, without any pessimistic picking out of the black bits and forgetting all the light ones, is bad enough.

Take three points on which I do not dwell and apply them to yourselves, dear brethren, and estimate by them the condition of things around us. First, say whether the ordinary tenor of our own religious life looks as if we had that Divine Spirit in us which transforms everything into its own beauty, and makes men, through all the regions of their nature, holy and pure. Then ask yourselves the question whether the standard of devotion and consecration in any church witnesses of the presence of a Divine Spirit. A little handful of people, the best of them very partially touched with the life of God, and very imperfectly consecrated to His service, surrounded by a great mass about whom we can scarcely, in the judgment of charity, say even so much, that is the description of most of our congregations. 'Are these His doings?' Surely somebody else's than His.

Take another question. Do the relations of modern Christians and their churches to one another attest the presence of a unifying Spirit? 'We have all been made to drink into one Spirit,' said Paul. Alas, alas! does it seem as if we had? Look round professing Christendom, look at the rivalries and the jealousies between two chapels in adjoining streets. Look at the gulfs between Christian men who differ only on some comparative trifle of organisation and polity, and say if such things correspond to the Pentecostal promise of one Spirit which is to make all the members into one body? 'Is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? Are these His doings?'

Take another branch of evidence. Look at the comparative impotence of the Church in its conflict with the growing worldliness of the world. I do not forget how much is being done all about us to-day, and how still Christ's Gospel is winning triumphs, but I do not suppose that any man can look thoughtfully and dispassionately on the condition, say, for instance, of Manchester, or of any of our great towns, and mark how the populace knows nothing and cares nothing about us and our Christianity, and never comes into our places of worship, and has no share in our hopes any more than if they lived in Central Africa, and that after eighteen hundred years of nominal Christianity, without feeling that some malign influence has arrested the leaping growth of the early Church, and that somehow or other that lava stream, if I might so call it, which poured hot from the heart of God in the old days has had its flow checked, and over its burning bed there has spread a black and wrinkled crust, whatsoever lingering heat there may still be at the centre. 'If God be with us, why has all this come upon us?'

III. And now, lastly, let us think for a moment of the solution of the contradiction.

The indignant questions of my text may be taken, with a little possibly permissible violence, as expressing and dismissing some untrue explanations. One explanation that sometimes is urged is, the Spirit of the Lord is straitened. That explanation takes two forms. Sometimes you hear people saying, 'Christianity is effete. We have to go now to fresh fountains of inspiration, and turn away from these broken cisterns that can hold no water.' I am not going to argue that question. I do not think for my part that Christianity will be effete until the world has got up to it and beyond it in its practice, and it will be a good while before that happens. Christianity will not be worn out until men have copied and reduced to practice the example of Jesus Christ, and they have not quite got that length yet. No shadow of a fear that the gospel has lost its power, or that God's Spirit has become weak, should be permitted to creep over our hearts. The promise is, 'I will send another Comforter, and He shall abide with you for ever.' It is a permanent gift that was given to the Church on that day. We have to distinguish in the story between the symbols, the gift, and the consequences of the gift. The first and the last are transient, the second is permanent. The symbols were transient. The people who came running together saw no tongues of fire. The consequences were transient. The tongues and the miraculous utterances were but for a time. The results vary according to the circumstances; but the central thing, the gift itself, is an irrevocable gift, and once bestowed is ever with the Church to all generations.

Another form of the explanation is the theory that God in His sovereignty is pleased to withhold His Spirit for reasons which we cannot trace. But it is not true that the gift once given varies in the degree in which it is continued. There is always the same flow from God. There are ebbs and flows in the spiritual power of the Church. Yes! and the tide runs out of your harbours. Is there any less water in the sea because it does? So the gift may ebb away from a man, from a community, from an epoch, not because God's manifestation and bestowment fluctuate, but because our receptivity changes. So we dismiss, and are bound to dismiss, if we are Christians, the unbelieving explanation, 'The Spirit of the Lord is straitened,' and not to sit with our hands folded, as if an inscrutable sovereignty, with which we have nothing to do, sometimes sent more and sometimes less of His spiritual gifts upon a waiting Church. It is not so. 'With Him is no variableness.' The gifts of God are without repentance; and the Spirit that was given once, according to the Master's own word already quoted, is given that He may abide with us for ever.

Therefore we have to come back to this, which is the point to which I seek to bring you and myself, in lowly penitence and contrite acknowledgment—that it is all our own fault and the result of evils in ourselves that may be remedied, that we have so little of that divine gift; and that if the churches of this country and of this day seem to be cursed and blasted in so much of their fruitless operations and formal worship, it is the fault of the churches, and not of the Lord of the churches. The stream that poured forth from the throne of God has not lost itself in the sands, nor is it shrunken in its volume. The fire that was kindled on Pentecost has not died down into grey ashes. The rushing of the mighty wind that woke on that morning has not calmed and stilled itself into the stagnancy and suffocating breathlessness of midday heat. The same fulness of the Spirit which filled the believers on that day is available for us all. If, like that waiting Church of old, we abide in prayer and supplication, the gift will be given to us too, and we may repeat and reproduce, if not the miracles which we do not need, yet the necessary inspiration of the highest and the noblest days and saints in the history of the Church. 'If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?' 'Ask and ye shall receive,' and be filled 'with the Holy Ghost and with power.'

Micah 2:13 CHRIST THE BREAKER

'The Breaker is come up before them: they have broken up, and have passed through the gate, and are gone out by it: and their king shall pass before them, and the Lord on the head of them.'— MICAH ii. 13

Micah was contemporary with Isaiah. The two prophets stand, to a large extent, on the same level of prophetic knowledge. Characteristic of both of them is the increasing clearness of the figure of the personal Messiah, and the increasing fulness of detail with which His functions are described. Characteristic of both of them is the presentation which we find in this text of that Messiah's work as being the gathering together of the scattered captive people and the leading them back in triumph into the blessed land.

Such is the image which underlies my text. Of course I have nothing to do now with questions as to any narrower and nearer historical fulfilment, because I believe that all these Messianic prophecies which were susceptible of, and many of which obtained, a historical and approximate fulfilment in the restoration of the Jews from the Babylonish captivity, have a higher and broader and more real accomplishment in that great deliverance wrought by Jesus Christ, of which all these earlier and partial and outward manifestations were themselves prophecies and shadows.

So I make no apology for taking the words before us as having their only real accomplishment in the office and working of Jesus Christ. He is 'the Breaker which is come up before us.' He it is that has broken out the path on which we may travel, and in whom, in a manner which the Prophet dreamed not of, 'the Lord is at the head' of us, and our King goes before us. So that my object is simply to take that great name, the Breaker, and to see the manifold ways in which in Scripture it is applied to the various work of Jesus Christ in our redemption.

I. I follow entirely the lead of corresponding passages in other portions of Scripture, and to begin with, I ask you to think of that great

work of our Divine Redeemer by which He has broken for the captives the prison-house of their bondage.

The image that is here before us is either that of some foreign land in which the scattered exiles were bound in iron captivity, or more probably some dark and gloomy prison, with high walls, massive gates, and barred windows, wherein they were held; and to them sitting hopeless in the shadow of death, and bound in affliction and iron, there comes one mysterious figure whom the Prophet could not describe more particularly, and at His coming the gates flew apart, and the chains dropped from their hands; and the captives had heart put into them, and gathering themselves together into a triumphant band, they went out with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads; freemen, and on the march to the home of their fathers. 'The Breaker is gone up before them; they have broken, and passed through the gate, and are gone out by it.'

And is not that our condition? Many of us know not the bondage in which we are held. We are held in it all the more really and sadly because we conceit ourselves to be free. Those poor, light-hearted people in the dreadful days of the French Revolution, used to keep up some ghastly mockery of society and cheerfulness in their prisons; and festooned the bars with flowers, and made believe to be carrying on their life freely as they used to do; but for all that, day after day the tumbrils came to the gates, and morning after morning the jailer stood at the door of the dungeons with the fatal list in his hand, and one after another of the triflers was dragged away to death. And so men and women are living a life which they fancy is free, and all the while they are in bondage, held in a prison-house. You, my brother! are chained by guilt; you are chained by sin, you are chained by the habit of evil with a strength of which you never know till you try to shake it off.

And there comes to each of us a mighty Deliverer, who breaks the gates of brass, and who cuts the bars of iron in sunder. Christ comes to us. By His death He has borne away the guilt; by His living Spirit He will bear away the dominion of sin from our hearts; and if the Son will make us free we shall be free indeed. Oh! ponder that deep truth, I pray you, which the Lord Christ has spoken in words that carry conviction in their very simplicity to every conscience: 'He that committeth sin is the slave of sin.' And as you feel sometimes—and you all feel sometimes—the catch of the fetter on your wrists when you would fain stretch out your hands to good, listen as to a true gospel to this old word which, in its picturesque imagery, carries a truth that should be life. To us all 'the Breaker is gone up before us,' the prison gates are open. Follow His steps, and take the freedom which He gives; and be sure that you 'stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free, and be not entangled again with any yoke of bondage.'

Men and women! Some of you are the slaves of your own lusts. Some of you are the slaves of the world's maxims. Some of you are held in bondage by some habit that you abominate, but cannot get away from. Here is freedom for you. The dark walls of the prison are round us all. 'The Scripture hath shut up all in sin, that He might have mercy upon all.' Blessed be His name! As the angel came to the sleeping Apostle, and to his light touch the iron gates swung obedient on their hinges, and Roman soldiers who ought to have watched their prey were lulled to sleep, and fetters that held the limbs dropped as if melted; so, silently, in His meek and merciful strength, the Christ comes to us all, and the iron gate which leadeth out into freedom opens of its own accord at His touch, and the fetters fall from our limbs, and we go forth free men. 'The Breaker is gone up before us.'

II. Again, take another application of this same figure found in Scripture, which sets forth Jesus Christ as being the Opener of the path to God.

'I am the Way and the Truth and the Life, no man cometh to the Father but by Me,' said He. And again, 'By a new and living way which He hath opened for us through the veil' (that is to say, His flesh), we can have free access 'with confidence by the faith of Him.' That is to say, if we rightly understand our natural condition, it is not only one of bondage to evil, but it is one of separation from God. Parts of the divine character are always beautiful and sweet to every human heart when it thinks about them. Parts of the divine character stand frowning before a man who knows himself for what he is; and conscience tells us that between God and us there is a mountain of impediment piled up by our own evil. To us Christ comes, the Path-finder and the Path; the Pioneer who breaks the way for us through all the hindrances, and leads us up to the presence of God.

For we do not know God as He is except by Jesus Christ. We see fragments, and often distorted fragments, of the divine nature and character apart from Jesus, but the real divine nature as it is, and as it is in its relation to me, a sinner, is only made known to me in the face of Jesus Christ. When we see Him we see God; Christ's tears are God's pity, Christ's gentleness is God's meekness, Christ's tender, drawing love is not only a revelation of a most pure and sweet Brother's heart, but a manifestation through that Brother's heart of the deepest depths of the divine nature. Christ is the heart of God. Apart from Him, we come to the God of our own consciences and we tremble; we come to the God of our own fancies and we presume; we come to the God dimly guessed at and pieced together from out of the hints and indications of His works, and He is little more than a dead name to us. Apart from Christ we come to a peradventure which we call a God; a shadow through which you can see the stars shining. But we know the Father when we believe in Christ. And so all the clouds rising from our own hearts and consciences and fancies and misconceptions, which we have piled together between God and ourselves, Christ clears away; and thus He opens the path to God.

And He opens it in another way too, on which I cannot dwell. It is only the God manifest in Jesus Christ that draws men's hearts to Him. The attractive power of the divine nature is ail in Him who has said, 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.' The God

whom men know, or think they know, outside of the revelation of divinity in Jesus Christ, is a God before whom they sometimes tremble, who is far more often their terror than their love, who is their 'ghastliest doubt' still more frequently than He is their 'dearest faith.' But the God that is in Christ woos and wins men to Him, and from His great sweetness there streams out, as it were, a magnetic influence that draws hearts to Him. The God that is in Christ is the only God that humanity ever loved. Other gods they may have worshipped with cowering terror and with far-off lip reverence, but this God has a heart, and wins hearts because He has. So Christ opens the way to Him.

And still further, in a yet higher fashion, that Saviour is the Path-breaker to the Divine Presence, in that He not only makes God known to us, and not only makes Him so known to us as to draw us to Him, but in that likewise He, by the fact of His Cross and passion, has borne and borne away the impediments of our own sin and transgression which rise for ever between us and Him, unless He shall sweep them out of the way. He has made 'the rough places plain and the crooked things straight'; levelled the mountains and raised the valleys, and cast up across all the wilderness of the world a highway along which 'the wayfaring man though a fool' may travel. Narrow understandings may know, and selfish hearts may love, and low-pitched confessions may reach the ear of the God who comes near to us in Christ, that we in Christ may come near to Him. The Breaker is gone up before us; 'having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest of all . . . by a new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us . . . let us draw near with true hearts'

III. Then still further, another modification of this figure is found in the frequent representations of Scripture, by which our Lord is the Breaker, going up before us in the sense that He is the Captain of our life's march.

We have, in the words of my text, the image of the gladly-gathered people flocking after the Leader. 'They have broken up, and have passed through the gate, and are gone out by it; and their King shall pass before them, and the Lord on the head of them.' The Prophet knew not that the Lord their King, of whom it is enigmatically said that He too, as well as 'the Breaker,' is to go before them, was in mysterious fashion to dwell in that Breaker; and that those two, whom He sees separately, are yet in a deep and mysterious sense one. The host of the captives, returning in triumphant march through the wilderness and to the promised land, is, in the Prophet's words, headed both by the Breaker and by the Lord. We know that the Breaker is the Lord, the Angel of the Covenant in whom is the name of Jehovah.

And so we connect with all these words of my text such words as designate our Saviour as the Captain of our salvation; such words as His own in which He says, 'When He putteth forth His sheep He goeth before them'—such words as His Apostle used when he said, 'Leaving us an ensample that we should follow in His steps.' And by all there is suggested this—that Christ, who breaks the prison of our sins, and leads us forth on the path to God, marches at the head of our life's journey, and is our Example and Commander; and Himself present with us through all life's changes and its sorrows.

Here is the great blessing and peculiarity of Christian morals that they are all brought down to that sweet obligation: 'Do as I did.' Here is the great blessing and strength for the Christian life in all its difficulties—you can never go where you cannot see in the desert the footprints, haply spotted with blood, that your Master left there before you, and planting your trembling feet in the prints, as a child might imitate his father's strides, may learn to recognise that all duty comes to this: 'Follow Me'; and that all sorrow is calmed, ennobled, made tolerable, and glorified, by the thought that He has borne it.

The Roman matron of the legend struck the knife into her bosom, and handed it to her husband with the words, 'It is not painful!' Christ has gone before us in all the dreary solitude, and in all the agony and pains of life. He has hallowed them all, and has taken the bitterness and the pain out of each of them for them that love Him. If we feel that the Breaker is before us, and that we are marching behind Him, then whithersoever He leads us we may follow, and whatsoever He has passed through we may pass through. We carry in His life the all-sufficing pattern of duty. We have in His companionship the all-strengthening consolation. Let us leave the direction of our road in His hands, who never says 'Go!' but always 'Come!' This General marches in the midst of His battalions and sets His soldiers on no enterprises or forlorn hopes which He has not Himself dared and overcome.

So Christ goes as our Companion before us, the true pillar of fire and cloud in which the present Deity abode, and He is with us in real companionship. Our joyful march through the wilderness is directed, patterned, protected, companioned by Him, and when He 'putteth forth His own sheep,' blessed be His name, 'He goeth before them.'

IV. And now, lastly, there is a final application of this figure which sets forth our Lord as the Breaker for us of the bands of death, and the Forerunner 'entered for us into the heavens.'

Christ's resurrection is the only solid proof of a future life. Christ's present resurrection life is the power by partaking in which, 'though we were dead, yet shall we live.'

He has trodden that path, too, before us. He has entered into the great prison-house into which the generations of men have been hounded and hurried; and where they lie in their graves, as in their narrow cells. He has entered there; with one blow He has struck the gates from their hinges, and has passed out, and no soul can any longer be shut in as for ever into that ruined and opened

prison. Like Samson, He has taken the gates which from of old barred its entrance, and borne them on His strong shoulders to the city on the hill, and now Death's darts are blunted, his fetters are broken, and his gaol has its doors wide open, and there is nothing for him to do now but to fall upon his sword and to kill himself, for his prisoners are free. 'Oh, death! I will be thy plague; oh, grave! I will be thy destruction.' 'The Breaker has gone up before us'; therefore it is not possible that we should be holden of the impotent chains that He has broken.

The Forerunner is for us entered and passed through the heavens, and entered into the holiest of all. We are too closely knit to Him, if we love Him and trust Him, to make it possible that we shall be where He is not, or that He shall be where we are not. Where He has gone we shall go. In heaven, blessed be His name! He will still be the leader of our progress and the captain at the head of our march. For He crowns all His other work by this, that having broken the prison-house of our sins, and opened for us the way to God, and been the leader and the captain of our march through all the pilgrimage of life, and the opener of the gate of the grave for our joyful resurrection, and the opener of the gate of heaven for our triumphal entrance, He will still as the Lamb that is in the midst of the Throne, go before us, and lead us into green pastures and by the still waters, and this shall be the description of the growing blessedness and power of the saints' life above, 'These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.'

Micah 4:5 AS GOD, SO WORSHIPPER

' . . . All the peoples will walk every one in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever.'— MICAH iv. 5 (R.V.) .

This is a statement of a general truth which holds good of all sorts of religion. 'To walk' is equivalent to carrying on a course of practical activity. 'The name' of a god is his manifested character. So the expression 'Walk in the name' means, to live and act according to, and with reference to, and in reliance on, the character of the worshipper's god. In the Lord's prayer the petition 'Hallowed be Thy name' precedes the petition 'Thy will be done.' From reverent thoughts about the name must flow life in reverent conformity to the will.

I. A man's god is what rules his practical life.

Religion is dependence upon a Being recognised to be perfect and sovereign, whose will guides, and whose character moulds, the whole life. That general statement may be broken up into parts; and we may dwell upon the attitude of dependence, or of that of submission, or upon that of admiration and recognition of ideal perfection, or upon that of aspiration; but we come at last to the one thought—that the goal of religion is likeness and the truest worship is imitation. Such a view of the essence of religion gives point to the question, What is our god? and makes it a very easily applied, and very searching test, of our lives. Whatever we profess, that which we feel ourselves dependent on, that which we invest, erroneously or rightly, with supreme attributes of excellence, that which we aspire after as our highest good, that which shapes and orders the current of our lives, is our god. We call ourselves Christians. I am afraid that if we tried ourselves by such a test, many of us would fail to pass it. It would thin the ranks of all churches as effectually as did Gideon's ordeal by water, which brought down a mob of ten thousand to a little steadfast band of three hundred. No matter to what church we belong, or how flaming our professions, our practical religion is determined by our answer to the question, What do we most desire? What do we most eagerly pursue? England has as much need as ever the house of Jacob had of the scathing words that poured like molten lead from the lips of Isaiah the son of Amoz, 'Their land is full of silver and gold, neither is there any end of their treasures. Their land is also full of idols: they worship the work of their own hands.' Money, knowledge, the good opinion of our fellows, success in a political career—these, and the like, are our gods. There is a worse idolatry than that which bows down before stocks and stones. The aims that absorb us; our highest ideal of excellence; that which possessed, we think would secure our blessedness; that lacking which everything else is insipid and vain—these are our gods: and the solemn prohibition may well be thundered in the ears of the unconscious idolaters not only in the English world, but also in the English churches. 'Thou shalt not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images.'

II. The worshipper will resemble his god in character.

As we have already said, the goal of religion is likeness, and the truest worship is imitation. It is proved by the universal experience of humanity that the level of morality will never rise above the type enshrined in their gods; or if it does, in consequence of contact with a higher type in a higher religion, the old gods will be flung to the moles and the bats. 'They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.' That is a universal truth. The worshippers were in the Prophet's thought as dumb and dead as the idols. They who 'worship vanity' inevitably 'become vain.' A Venus or a Jupiter, a Baal or an Ashtoreth, sets the tone of morals.

This truth is abundantly enforced by observation of the characters of the men amongst us who are practical idolaters. They are narrowed and lowered to correspond with their gods. Low ideals can never lead to lofty lives. The worship of money makes the complexion yellow, like jaundice. A man who concentrates his life's effort upon some earthly good, the attainment of which seems to be, so long as it is unattained, his passport to bliss, thereby blunts many a finer aspiration, and makes himself blind to many a nobler vision. Men who are always hunting after some paltry and perishable earthly good, become like dogs who follow scent with their

noses at the ground, and are unconscious of everything a yard above their heads. We who live amidst the rush of a great commercial community see many instances of lives stiffened, narrowed, impoverished, and hardened by the fierce effort to become rich. And wherever we look with adequate knowledge over the many idolatries of English life, we see similar processes at work on character. Everywhere around us 'the peoples are walking every one in the name of his god.' That character constitutes the worshipper's ideal; it is a pattern to which he aims to be assimilated; it is a good the possession of which he thinks will make him blessed; it is that for which he willingly sacrifices much which a clearer vision would teach him is far more precious than that for which he is content to barter it.

The idolaters walking in the name of their god is a rebuke to the Christian men who with faltering steps and many an aberration are seeking to walk in the name of the Lord their God. If He is in any real and deep sense 'our God,' we shall see in Him the realised ideal of all excellence, the fountain of all our blessedness, the supreme good for our seeking hearts, the sovereign authority to sway our wills; the measure of our conscious possession of Him will be the measure of our glad imitation of Him, and our joyful spirits, enfranchised by the assurance of our loving possession of Him who is love, will hear Him ever whisper to us, 'Be ye perfect as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.' The desire to reproduce in the narrow bounds of our human spirits the infinite beauties of the Lord our God will give elevation to our lives, and dignity to our actions attainable from no other source. If we hallow His name, we shall do His will, and earth will become a foretaste of heaven.

III. The worshipper will resemble his god in fate.

We may observe that it is only of God's people that Micah in our text applies the words 'for ever and ever.' 'The peoples' worship perishes. They walk for a time in the name of their god, but what comes of it at last is veiled in silence. It is Jehovah's worshippers who walk in His name for ever and ever, and of whom the great words are true, 'Because I live ye shall live also.' We may be sure of this that all the divine attributes are pledged for our immortality; we may be sure, too, that a soul which here follows in the footsteps of Jesus, which in its earthly life walked in the name of the Lord its God, will continue across the narrow bridge, and go onward 'for ever and ever' in direct progress in the same direction in which it began on earth. The imitation, which is the practical religion of every Christian, has for its only possible result the climax of likeness. The partial likeness is attained on earth by contemplation, by aspiration, and by effort; but it is perfected in the heavens by the perfect vision of His perfect face. 'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' Not till it has reached its goal can the Christian life begun here be conceived as ended. It shall never be said of any one who tried by God's help to walk 'in the name of the Lord' that he was lost in the desert, and never reached his journey's end. The peoples who walked in the name of any false god will find their path ending as on the edge of a precipice, or in an unfathomable bog; loss, and woe, and shame will be their portion. But 'the name of the Lord is a strong tower,' into which whoever will may run and be safe, and to walk in the name of the Lord is to walk on a way 'that shall be called the Way of Holiness, whereon no ravenous beast shall go up, but the redeemed shall walk there,' and all that are on it 'shall come with singing to Zion, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.'

Micah 5:7: 'A DEW FROM THE LORD'

'The remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord, that tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons of men.'—MICAH v. 7 .

The simple natural science of the Hebrews saw a mystery in the production of the dew on a clear night, and their poetic imagination found in it a fit symbol for all silent and gentle influences from heaven that refreshed and quickened parched and dusty souls. Created by an inscrutable process in silence and darkness, the dewdrops lay innumerable on the dry plains and hung from every leaf and thorn, each little globule a perfect sphere that reflected the sun, and twinkled back the beams in its own little rainbow. Where they fell the scorched vegetation lifted its drooping head. That is what Israel is to be in the world, says Micah. He saw very deep into God's mind and into the function of the nation.

It may be a question as to whether the text refers more especially to the place and office of Israel when planted in its own land, or when dispersed among the nations. For, as you see, he speaks of 'the remnant of Jacob' as if he was thinking of the survivors of some great calamity which had swept away the greater portion of the nation. Both things are true. When settled in its own land, Israel's office was to teach the nations God; when dispersed among the Gentiles, its office ought to have been the same. But be that as it may, the conception here set forth is as true to-day as ever it was. For the prophetic teachings, rooted though they may be in the transitory circumstances of a tiny nation, are 'not for an age, but for all time,' and we get a great deal nearer the heart of them when we grasp the permanent truths that underlie them, than when we learnedly exhume the dead history which was their occasion.

Micah's message comes to all Christians, and very eminently to English Christians. The subject of Christian missions is before us to-day, and some thoughts in the line of this great text may not be inappropriate.

We have here, then,

I. The function of each Christian in his place.

'The remnant of Jacob shall be as a dew from the Lord in the midst of many nations.' What made Israel 'as a dew'? One thing only; its religion, its knowledge of God, and its consequent purer morality. It could teach Greece no philosophy, no art, no refinement, no sensitiveness to the beautiful. It could teach Rome no lessons of policy or government. It could bring no wisdom to Egypt, no power or wealth to Assyria. But God lit His candle and set it on a candlestick, that it 'might give light to all that were in the house.'

The same thing is true about Christian people. We cannot teach the world science, we cannot teach it philosophy or art, but we can teach it God. Now the possibility brings with it the obligation. The personal experience of Jesus Christ in our hearts, as the dew that brings to us life and fertility, carries with it a commission as distinct and imperative as if it had been pealed into each single ear by a voice from heaven. That which made Israel the 'dew amidst many nations,' parched for want of it, makes Christian men and women fit to fill the analogous office, and calls upon them to discharge the same functions. For—in regard to all our possessions, and therefore most eminently and imperatively in regard to the best—that which we have, we have as stewards, and the Gospel, as the Apostle found, was not only given to him for his own individual enjoyment, elevation, ennobling, emancipation, salvation, but was 'committed to his charge,' and he was 'entrusted' with it, as he says, as a sacred deposit.

Remember, too, that, strange as it may seem, the only way by which that knowledge of God which was bestowed upon Israel could become the possession of the world was by its first of all being made the possession of a few. People talk about the unfairness, the harshness, of the providential arrangement by which the whole world was not made participant of the revelation which was granted to Israel. The fire is gathered on to a hearth. Does that mean that the corners of the room are left uncared for? No! the brazier is in the middle—as Palestine was, even geographically in the centre of the then civilised world—that from the centre the beneficent warmth might radiate and give heat as well as light to 'all them that are in the house.'

So it is in regard to all the great possessions of the race. Art, literature, science, political wisdom, they are all intrusted to a few who are made their apostles; and the purpose is their universal diffusion from these human centres. It is in the line of the analogy of all the other gifts of God to humanity, that chosen men should be raised up in whom the life is lodged, that it may be diffused.

So to us the message comes: 'The Lord hath need of thee.' Christ has died; the Cross is the world's redemption. Christ lives that He may apply the power and the benefits of His death and of His risen life to all humanity. But the missing link between the all sufficient redemption that is in Christ Jesus, and the actual redemption of the world, is 'the remnant of Jacob,' the Christian Church which is to be 'in the midst of many people, as a dew from the Lord.'

Now, that diffusion from individual centres of the life that is in Jesus Christ is the chiefest reason—or at all events, is one chief reason—for the strange and inextricable intertwining in modern society, of saint and sinner, of Christian and non-Christian. The seed is sown among the thorns; the wheat springs up amongst the tares. Their roots are so matted together that no hand can separate them. In families, in professions, in business relations, in civil life, in national life, both grow together. God sows His seed thin that all the field may smile in harvest. The salt is broken up into many minute particles and rubbed into that which it is to preserve from corruption. The remnant of Jacob is in the midst of many peoples; and you and I are encompassed by those who need our Christ, and who do not know Him or love Him; and one great reason for the close intertwining is that, scattered, we may diffuse, and that at all points the world may be in contact with those who ought to be working to preserve it from putrefaction and decay.

Now there are two ways by which this function may be discharged, and in which it is incumbent upon every Christian man to make his contribution, be it greater or smaller, to the discharge of it. The one is by direct efforts to impart to others the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ which we have, and which we profess to be the very root of our lives. We can all do that if we will, and we are here to do it. Every one of us has somebody or other close to us, bound to us, perhaps, by the tie of kindred and love, who will listen to us more readily than to anybody else. Christian men and women, have you utilised these channels which God Himself, by the arrangements of society, has dug for you, that through them you may pour upon some thirsty ground the water of life? We could also help, and help far more than any of us do, in associated efforts for the same purpose. The direct obligation to direct efforts to impart the Gospel cannot be shirked, though, alas! it is far too often ignored by us professing Christians.

But there is another way by which 'the remnant of Jacob' is to be 'a dew from the Lord,' and that is by trying to bring to bear Christian thoughts and Christian principles upon all the relations of life in which we stand, and upon all the societies, be they greater or smaller—the family, the city, or the nation—of which we form parts. We have heard a great deal lately about what people that know very little about it, are pleased to call 'the Nonconformist conscience,' I take the compliment, which is not intended, but is conveyed by the word. But I venture to say that what is meant, is not the 'Nonconformist' conscience, it is the Christian conscience. We Nonconformists have no monopoly, thank God, of that. Nay, rather, in some respects, our friends in the Anglican churches are teaching some of us a lesson as to the application of Christian principles to civic duty and to national life. I beseech you, although I do not mean to dwell upon that point at all at this time, to ask yourselves whether, as citizens, the vices, the godlessness, the miseries—the removable miseries—of our great town populations, lie upon your hearts. Have you ever lifted a finger to abate

drunkenness? Have you ever done anything to help to make it possible that the masses of our town communities should live in places better than the pigsties in which many of them have to wallow? Have you any care for the dignity, the purity, the Christianity of our civic rulers; and do you, to the extent of your ability, try to ensure that Christ's teaching shall govern the life of our cities? And the same question may be put yet more emphatically with regard to wider subjects, namely, the national life and the national action, whether in regard to war or in regard to other pressing subjects for national consideration. I do not touch upon these; I only ask you to remember the grand ideal of my text, which applies to the narrowest circle—the family; and to the wider circles—the city and the nation, as well as to the world. Time was when a bastard piety shrank back from intermeddling with these affairs and gathered up its skirts about it in an ecstasy of unwholesome unworldliness. There is not much danger of that now, when Christian men are in the full swim of the currents of civic, professional, literary, national life. But I will tell you of what there is a danger—Christian men and women moving in their families, going into town councils, going into Parliament, going to the polling booths, and leaving their Christianity behind them. 'The remnant of Jacob shall be as a dew from the Lord.'

Now let me turn for a moment to a second point, and that is

II. The function of English Christians in the world.

I have suggested in an earlier part of this sermon that possibly the application of this text originally was to the scattered remnant. Be that as it may, wherever you go, you find the Jew and the Englishman. I need not dwell upon the ubiquity of our race. I need not point you to the fact that, in all probability, our language is destined to be the world's language some day. I need do nothing more than recall the fact that a man may go on board ship, in Liverpool or London, and go round the world; everywhere he sees the Union Jack, and everywhere he lands upon British soil. The ubiquity of the scattered Englishman needs no illustration.

But I do wish to remind you that that ubiquity has its obligation. We hear a great deal to-day about Imperialism, about 'the Greater Britain,' about 'the expansion of England.' And on one side all that new atmosphere of feeling is good, for it speaks of a vivid consciousness which is all to the good in the pulsations of the national life. But there is another side to it that is not so good. What is the expansion sought for? Trade? Yes! necessarily; and no man who lives in Lancashire will speak lightly of that necessity. Vulgar greed, and earth-hunger? that is evil. Glory? that is cruel, blood-stained, empty. My text tells us why expansion should be sought, and what are the obligations it brings with it. 'The remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord' There are two kinds of Imperialism: one which regards the Empire as a thing for the advantage of us here, in this little land, and another which regards it as a burden that God has laid on the shoulders of the men whom John Milton, two centuries ago, was not afraid to call 'His Englishmen.'

Let me remind you of two contrasted pictures which will give far more forcibly than anything I can say, the two points of view from which our world-wide dominion may be regarded. Here is one of them: 'By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent. And I have removed the bounds of the people, and have robbed their treasures, and my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people; and as one gathereth eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing, or opened a mouth, or peeped.' That is the voice of the lust for Empire for selfish advantages. And here is the other one: 'The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents; yea, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him, for He shall deliver the needy when he crieth, the poor also, and him that hath no helper. He shall redeem their soul from deceit and violence, and precious shall their blood be in His sight.' That is the voice that has learned: 'He that is greatest among you, let him be your servant'; and that the dominion founded on unselfish surrender for others is the only dominion that will last. Brethren! that is the spirit in which alone England will keep its Empire over the world.

I need not remind you that the gift which we have to carry to the heathen nations, the subject peoples who are under the æs of our laws, is not merely our literature, our science, our Western civilisation, still less the products of our commerce, for all of which some of them are asking; but it is the gift that they do not ask for. The dew 'waiteth not for man, nor tarrieth for the sons of men.' We have to create the demand by bringing the supply. We have to carry Christ's Gospel as the greatest gift that we have in our hands.

And now, I was going to have said a word, lastly, but I see it can only be a word, about—

III. The failure to fulfil the function.

Israel failed. Pharisaism was the end of it—a hugging itself in the possession of the gift which it did not appreciate, and a bitter contempt of the nations, and so destruction came, and the fire on the hearth was scattered and died out, and the vineyard was taken from them and 'given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.' Change the name, as the Latin poet says, and the story is told about us. England largely fails in this function; as witness in India godless civilians; as witness on every palm-shaded coral beach in the South Seas, profligate beach-combers, drunken sailors, unscrupulous traders; as witness the dying out of races by diseases imported with profligacy and gin from this land. 'A dew from the Lord!'; say rather a malaria from the devil! 'By you,' said the Prophet, 'is the name of God blasphemed among the Gentiles.' By Englishmen the missionary's efforts are, in a hundred cases, neutralised, or hampered if not neutralised.

We have failed because, as Christian people, we have not been adequately in earnest. No man can say with truth that the churches of England are awake to the imperative obligation of this missionary enterprise. 'If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He spare not thee.' Israel's religion was not diffusive, therefore it corrupted; Israel's religion did not reach out a hand to the nations, therefore its heart was paralysed and stricken. They who bring the Gospel to others increase their own hold upon it. There is a joy of activity, there is a firmer faith, as new evidences of its power are presented before them. There is the blessing that comes down upon all faithful discharge of duty; 'If the house be not worthy, your peace shall return to you.' After all, our Empire rests on moral foundations, and if it is administered by us—and we each have part of the responsibility for all that is done—on the selfish ground of only seeking the advantage of 'the predominant partner,' then our hold will be loosened. There is no such cement of empire as a common religion. If we desire to make these subject peoples loyal fellow-subjects, we must make them true fellow-worshippers. The missionary holds India for England far more strongly than the soldier does. If we apply Christian principles to our administration of our Empire, then instead of its being knit together by iron bands, it will be laced together by the intertwining tendrils of the hearts of those who are possessors of 'like precious faith.' Brethren, there is another saying in the Old Testament, about the dew. 'I will be as the dew unto Israel,' says God through the Prophet. We must have Him as the dew for our own souls first. Then only shall we be able to discharge the office laid upon us, to be in the midst of many peoples as 'dew from the Lord.' If our fleece is wet and we leave the ground dry, our fleece will soon be dry, though the ground may be bedewed.

Micah 6:8: GOD'S REQUIREMENTS AND GOD'S GIFT

'What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?'—
MICAH vi. 8

This is the Prophet's answer to a question which he puts into the mouth of his hearers. They had the superstitious estimate of the worth of sacrifice, which conceives that the external offering is pleasing to God, and can satisfy for sin. Micah, like his great contemporary Isaiah, and the most of the prophets, wages war against that misconception of sacrifice, but does not thereby protest against its use. To suppose that he does so is to misunderstand his whole argument. Another misuse of the words of my text is by no means uncommon to-day. One has heard people say, 'We are plain men; we do not understand your theological subtleties; we do not quite see what you mean by "Repentance toward God, and faith in Jesus Christ." "To do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with my God," that is my religion, and I leave all the rest to you.' That is our religion too, but notice that word 'require.' It is a harsh word, and if it is the last word to be said about God's relation to men, then a great shadow has fallen upon life.

But there is another word which Micah but dimly caught uttered amidst the thunders of Sinai, and which you and I have heard far more clearly. The Prophet read off rightly God's requirements, but he had not anything to say about God's gifts. So his word is a half-truth, and the more clearly it is seen, and the more earnestly a man tries to live up to the standard of the requirements laid down here, the more will he feel that there is something else needed, and the more will he see that the great central peculiarity and glory of Christianity is not that it reiterates or alters God's requirements, but that it brings into view God's gifts. 'To do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God,' is possible only through repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And if you suppose that these words of my text disclose the whole truth about God's relation to men, and men's to God, you have failed to apprehend the flaming centre of the Light that shines from heaven.

I. So, then, the first thing that I wish to suggest is God's requirements.

Now, I do not need to say more than just a word or two about the summing-up in my text of the plain, elementary duties of morality and religion. It covers substantially the same ground, in a condensed form, as does the Decalogue, only that Moses began with the deepest thing and worked outwards, as it were; laying the foundation in a true relation to God, which is the most important, and from which will follow the true relation to men. Micah begins at the other end, and starting with the lesser, the more external, the purely human, works his way inwards to that which is the centre and the source of all.

'To do justly,' that is elementary morality in two words. Whatever a man has a right to claim from you, give him; that is the sum of duty. And yet not altogether so, for we all know the difference between a righteous man and a good man, and how, if there is only rigidly righteous action, there is something wanting to the very righteousness of the action and to the completeness of the character. 'To do' is not enough; we must get to the heart, and so 'love mercy.' Justice is not all. If each man gets his deserts, as Shakespeare says, 'who of us shall scape whipping?' There must be the mercy as well as the justice. In a very deep sense no man renders to his fellows all that his fellows have a right to expect of him, who does not render to them mercy. And so in a very deep sense, mercy is part of justice, and you have not given any poor creature all that that poor creature has a right to look for from you, unless you have given him all the gracious and gentle charities of heart and hand. Justice and mercy do, in the deepest view, run into one.

Then Micah goes deeper. 'And to walk humbly with thy God.' Some people would say that this summary of the divine requirements is defective, because there is nothing in it about a man's duty to himself, which is as much a duty as his duty to his fellows, or his duty to God. But there is a good deal of my duty to myself crowded into that one word, 'humbly.' For I suppose we might almost say that

the basis of all our obligations to our own selves lies in this, that we shall take the right view—that is, the lowly view—of ourselves. But I pass that.

‘To walk humbly with thy God.’ ‘Can two walk together unless they be agreed?’ For walking with God there must be communion, based in love, and resulting in imitation. And that communion must be constant, and run through all the life, like a golden thread through some web. So, then, here is the minimum of the divine requirements, to give everybody what he has a right to, including the mercy to which he has a right, to have a lowly estimate of myself, and to live continually grasping the hand of God, and conscious of His overshadowing wing at all moments, and of conformity to His will at every step of the road. That is the minimum; and the people who so glibly say, ‘That is my religion,’ have little consciousness of how far-reaching and how deep-down-going the requirements of this text are. The requirements result from the very nature of God, and our relation to Him, and they are endorsed by our own consciences, for we all know that these, and nothing less than these are the duties that we owe to God. So much for God’s requirements.

II. Our failure.

There is not one of us that has come up to the standard. Man after man may be conceived of as bringing in his hands the actions of his life, and laying them in the awful scales which God’s hand holds. In the one are God’s requirements, in the other my life; and in every case down goes the weight, and ‘weighed in the balances we are altogether lighter than vanity.’ We stand before the great Master in the school, and one by one we take up our copybooks; and there is not one of them that is not black with blots and erasures and swarming with errors. The great cliff stands in front of us with the victor’s prize on its topmost ledge, and man after man tries to climb, and falls bruised and broken at the base. ‘There is none righteous, no, not one.’ Micah’s requirements come to every man that will honestly take stock of his life and his character as the statement of an unreachd and unreachable ideal to which he never has climbed nor ever can climb.

Oh, brethren! if these words are all the words that are to be said about God and me, then I know not what lies before the enlightened conscience except shuddering despair, and a paralysing consciousness of inevitable failure. I beseech you, take these words, and go apart with them, and test your daily life by them. God requires me to do justly. Does there not rise before my memory many an act in which, in regard to persons and in regard to circumstances, I have fallen beneath that requirement? He requires me ‘to love mercy.’ He requires me ‘to walk humbly,’ and I have often been inflated and self-conceited and presumptuous. He requires me to walk with Himself, and I have shaken away His hand from me, and passed whole days without ever thinking of Him, and ‘the God in whose hands’ my ‘breath is, and whose are all’ my ‘ways,’ I have ‘not glorified.’ I cannot hammer this truth into your consciences. You have to do it for yourselves. But I beseech you, recognise the fact that you are implicated in the universal failure, and that God’s requirement is God’s condemnation of each of us.

If, then, that is true, that all have come short of the requirement, then there should follow a universal sense of guilt, for there is the universal fact of guilt, whether there be the sense of it or not. There must follow, too, consequences resulting from the failure of each of us to comply with these divine requirements, consequences very alarming, very fatal; and there must follow a darkening of the thought of God. ‘I knew thee that thou wert an austere man, reaping where thou didst not sow, and gathering where thou didst not straw.’ That is the God of all the people who take my text as the last word of their religion—God ‘requires of me. The blessed sun in the heavens becomes a lurid ball of fire when it is seen through the mist of such a conception of the divine character, and its relation to men. There is nothing that so drapes the sky in darkness, and hides out the great light of God, as the thought of His requirements as the last thought we cherish concerning Him.

There follows, too, upon this conception, and the failure that results to fulfil the requirements, a hopelessness as to ever accomplishing that which is demanded of us. Who amongst us is there that, looking back upon his past in so far as it has been shaped by his own effort and his own unaided strength, can look forward to a future with any hope that it will mend the past? Brethren! experience teaches us that we have not fulfilled, and cannot fulfil, what remains our plain duty, notwithstanding our inability to discharge it—viz., ‘To do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.’ To think of God’s requirements, and of my own failure, is the sure way to paralyse all activity; just as that man in the parable who said, ‘Thou art an austere man,’ went away and hid his talent in the earth. To think of God’s requirements and my own failures, if heaven has nothing more to say to me than this stern ‘Thou shalt,’ is the short way to despair. And that is why most of us prefer to be immersed in the trivialities of daily life rather than to think of God, and of what He asks from us. For the only way by which some of us can keep our equanimity and our cheerfulness is by ignoring Him and forgetting what He demands, and never taking stock of our own lives.

III. Lastly, my text leads us to think of God’s gift.

I said it is a half-truth, for it only tells us of what He desires us to be, and does not tell us of how we may be it. It is meant, like the law of which it is a condensation, to be the pedagogue, to lead the child to Jesus Christ, the true Master, and the true Gift of God.

God ‘requires.’ Yes, and He requires, in order that we should say to Him, ‘Lord, Thou hast a right to ask this, and it is my

blessedness to give it, but I cannot. Do Thou give me what Thou dost require, and then I can.'

The gift of God is Jesus Christ, and that gift meets all our failures. I have spoken of the sense of guilt that rises from the consciousness of failure to keep the requirements of the divine law; and the gift of God deals with that. It comes to us as we lie wounded, bruised, conscious of failure, alarmed for results, sensible of guilt, and dreading the penalties, and it says to us, 'Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.' 'God requires of thee what thou hast not done. Trust yourselves to Me, and all iniquity is passed from your souls.'

I spoke of the hopelessness of future performance, which results from experience of past failures; and the gift of God deals with that. You cannot meet the requirements. Christ will put His Spirit into your spirits, if you will trust yourselves to Him, and then you will meet them, for the things which are impossible with men are possible with God. So, if led by Micah, we pass from God's requirements to His gifts, look at the change in the aspect which God bears to us. He is no longer standing strict to mark, and stern to judge and condemn: but bending down graciously to help. His last word to us is not 'Thou shalt do' but 'I will give.' His utterance in the Gospel is not 'do,' but it is 'take'; and the vision of God, which shines out upon us from the life and from the Cross of Jesus Christ, is not that of a great Taskmaster, but that of Him who helps all our weakness, and makes it strength. A God who 'requires' paralyses men, shuts men out from hope and joy and fellowship; a God who gives draws men to His heart, and makes them diligent in fulfilling all His blessed requirements.

Think of the difference which the conception of God as giving makes to the spirit in which we work. No longer, like the Israelites in Egypt, do we try to make bricks without straw, and break our hearts over our failures, or desperately abandon the attempt, and live in neglect of God and His will; but joyfully, with the clear confidence that 'our labour is not in vain in the Lord,' we seek to keep the commandments which we have learned to be the expressions of His love. One of the Fathers puts all in one lovely sentence: 'Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt.'

Think, too, of the difference which this conception of the giving rather than of the requiring God brings into what we have to do. We have not to begin with effort, we have to begin with faith. The fountain must be filled from the spring before it can send up its crystal pillar flashing in the sunlight; and we must receive by our trust the power to will and to do. First fill the lamp with oil, and let the Master light it, and then let its blaze beam forth. First, we have to go to the giving God, with thanks 'unto Him for His unspeakable gift'; and then we have to say to Him, 'Thou hast given me Thy Son. What dost Thou desire that I shall give to Thee?' We have first to accept the gift, and then, moved by the mercy of God, to ask, 'Lord I what wilt Thou have me to do?'