

Sermon on the Mount Sermons 2

SERMON ON THE MOUNT SERIES

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MT 5:6 FOURTH BEATITUDE

Alexander Maclaren

TWO preliminary remarks will give us the point of view from which I desire to consider these words now. First, we have seen, in previous sermons, that these paradoxes of the Christian life which we call the Beatitudes are a linked chain, or, rather, an outgrowth from a common root. Each presupposes all the preceding. Now, of course, it is a mistake to expect uniformity in the process of building up character, and stages which are separable and successive in thought may be simultaneous and coalesce in fact. But none the less is our Lord here outlining successive stages in the growth of a true Christian life. I shall have more to say about the place in the series which this Beatitude holds, but for the present I simply ask you to remember that it has a background and set of previous experiences, out of which it springs, and that we shall not understand the depth of Christ's meaning if we isolate it from these and regard it as standing alone.

Then, another consideration is the remarkable divergence in this Beatitude from the others. The 'meek,' the 'merciful,' the 'pure in heart,' the 'peacemakers,' have all attained to certain characteristics. But this is not a benediction pronounced upon those who have attained to righteousness, but upon those who long after it. Desire, which has reached such a pitch as to be comparable to the physical craving of a hungry man for food or to the imperious thirst of parched throats, seems a strange kind of blessedness; but it is better to long for a higher — though it be unattained — good than to be content with a lower which is possessed. Better to climb, though the summit be far and the path be steep, than to browse amongst the herds in the fat valleys. Aspiration is blessedness when it is worthily directed. Let us, then, look at these two points of this Beatitude; this divine hunger of the soul, and its satisfaction which is sure.

I. Note, then, the hunger which is blessed.

Now 'righteousness' has come to be a kind of theological term which people use without attaching any very distinct meaning to it. And it would be little improvement to substitute for 'righteousness' the abstraction of moral conformity to the will of God. Suppose we try to turn the words of my text into modern English, and instead of saying, 'Blessed are those that hunger and thirst after righteousness,' say, 'Blessed are the men and women that long more than for anything else to be good. Does not that sound a little more near our daily lives than the well-worn and threadbare word of my text? Righteousness is neither more nor less than in spirit a will submitted to God, and in conduct the practice of whatsoever things are noble and lovely and of good report.

The production of such a character, the aiming after the perfection of spirit and of conduct, is the highest aim that a man can set before him. There are plenty of other hungers of the soul that are legitimate. There are many of them that are bracing and ennobling and elevating. It is impossible not to hunger for the supply of physical necessities. It is good to long for love, for wisdom.

It is better to long most to be good men and women. For what are we here for? To enjoy? To work? To know? Yes I But it is not conduct, and it is still less thought, and it is least of all enjoyment, in any of its forms, which is the purpose of life, and ought to be our aim here upon earth. We are here to learn to be; and the cultivation and production of characters that lie parallel with the will of God is the Omega of all our life in the flesh. All these other things, even the highest of them, the yearning desire

***‘To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the furthest bounds of human thought,’***

ought to be subordinate to this further purpose of being good men and women. All these are scaffolding; the building is a character conformed to God’s will and assimilated to Christ’s likeness.

That commends itself as a statement of man’s chief end to all reasonable and thoughtful men in their deepest and truest moments. And so, whilst we must let our desires go out on the lower levels, and seek to draw to ourselves the various gifts that are necessary for the various phases and sides of our being, here is one that a man’s own conscience tells him should stand clearly supreme and dominant — the hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Still further, notice how this desire, on which our Lord pronounces His benediction, comes in a series. I know that all men have latent, and sometimes partially and fragmentarily operative in their lives and manifest on the surface, sporadic desires after goodness. The existence of these draws the line between man and devil. And there is no soul on earth which has not sometimes felt the longing to be better than it is, to its own consciousness, to-day. But the yearning which our Lord blesses comes after, and is the result of, the previous characteristics which He has described. There must be the poverty of spirit which recognises our own insufficiency and unworthiness; or, to put it into simpler words, we must know ourselves to be sinners. There must be the mourning which follows upon that revelation of ourselves; the penitence which does not wash away sin, but which makes us capable of receiving forgiveness. There must be the comfort which comes from pardon received; and there must be the yielding of ourselves to the Supreme Will, which is the true root of all meekness, in the face of antagonism from creatures and of opposition from circumstances. When thus a man’s self-conceit is beaten out of him, and he knows how far he is from the possession of any real, deep righteousness of his own; and when, further, his heart has glowed with the consciousness of forgiveness; and when, further, his will has bowed itself before the Father in heaven, then there will spring in his heart a hungering and thirsting, deeper far and far more certain of fruition, than ever can be realised in another heart, a stranger to such experiences. Brethren, if we are ever to possess the righteousness which is itself blessed, it must be because we have the hunger and the thirst which are sharpened and accentuated by profound discovery of our own evil, lowly penitence before God, and glad assurance of free and full forgiveness.

Then note, still further, how that which is pronounced blessed is not the realisation of a desire, but the desire itself. And that is so, not only because, as I said, all noble aspiration is good, fulfilled or unfulfilled, and aim is of more importance than achievement, and what a man strongly wishes is often the revelation of his deepest self, and the prophecy of what he will be; but Christ puts the desire for a certain quality here as in line with the possession of a number of other qualities attained, because He would hint to us that such a righteousness as shall satisfy the immortal hunger and thirst of our souls is one to be received in answer to longing, and not to be manufactured by our own efforts.

It is a gift; and the condition of receiving the gift is to wish it honestly, earnestly, deeply, continually. The Psalmist had a glimpse of the same truth when he crowned his description of the man who was fit to ascend the hill of the Lord, and to stand in His holy place, with, ‘he shall receive the blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.’

Of course, in saying that the first step towards the possession of this divinely bestowed and divinely blessed righteousness is not effort but longing, I do not forget that the retention of it, and the working of it into our characters, and out in our conduct, must be the result of our own continual diligence. But it is effort based on faith; and it is mainly, as I believe, the effort to keep open the line of communication between us and God, the great Giver, which ensures our possession of this gift of God. Dear friends, the righteousness that avails for us is not of our making, but of God’s giving, through Jesus Christ.

So, before I pass to the other thoughts of my text, may I pause here for a moment? ‘Blessed are they that hunger and thirst’ — think of the picture that suggests — the ravenous desire of a starving man, the almost fierce longing of a parched throat. Is that picture of the intensity, of the depth, of our desires to be good? Do we professing Christian men and women long to be delivered from our evils and to be clothed in righteousness, with an honesty and an earnestness and a continuity of longing which would make such words as these of my text anything else, if applied to us, than the bitterest irony? Oh, one looks out over the Christian Church, and one looks — which is more to the purpose — into one’s own heart, and contrasts the tepid, the lazy, the occasional, and, I am afraid, the only half-sincere wishes to be better, with the unmistakable earnestness and reality of our longings to be rich, or wise, or prosperous, or famous, or happy in our domestic relationships, and the like. Alas! alas! that the whole current of the great river of so many professing Christians’ desires runs towards earth and creatures, and the tiniest little trickle is taken off, like a lade for a mill, from the great stream, and directed towards higher things. It is hunger and thirst after righteousness that is blessed. You and I can tell whether our desires deserve such a name as that.

II. And now, secondly, the satisfying of this divine hunger of the soul.

'They shall be filled,' says our Lord. Now all these promises appended to the Beatitudes have a double reference — to the certainty of the present, and to the perfection of the future. That there is such a double reference may be made very obvious if we notice that the first of the promises, which includes them all, and of which the others are but aspects and phases, is cast into the present tense, whilst the remainder stand in the future. 'Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven,' not shall be — 'they shall be comforted,' they 'shall inherit the earth,' and so on. So, then, we are warranted, indeed we are obliged, to regard this great promise in the text as having two epochs of fulfilment — one partially here upon earth, one complete hereafter. And these two differ, not in kind, but in degree.

So then, with regard even to the present, 'they shall be filled.' Should not that be a gospel to the seeking spirit of man, who knows so well what it is to be crucified with the pangs of a vain desire, and to set his heart upon that which never comes into his hands? There is one region in which nothing is so impossible as that any desire should be in vain, or any wish should be unfulfilled, and it is the region into which Christ points us in these great words of my text. Turn away from earth, where fulfilled desires and unfulfilled are often equally disappointed ones. Turn away from the questionable satisfactions which come to those whose hearts go out in longing for love, wisdom, wealth, transitory felicity; and be sure of this, that the one longing which never will be disappointed, nor, when answered, will prove to have given us but ashes instead of bread, is the longing to be like God and like Christ. That desire alone is sure to be fulfilled, and, being fulfilled, is sure to be blessed.

It is not true that all desires after righteousness are fulfilled. Those which spring up, as I have said, in men's hearts sporadically, and apart from the background of the experiences of my text, are not always, not often, even partially accomplished. There are in every land, no doubt, souls that thirst after righteousness, as they are able to discern it. And we are sure of this, that no such effort and longing passes unnoticed by Him 'who hears the young ravens when they cry,' and is not deaf to the prayer of men who long to be good. But the experience of the bulk of us, apart from Jesus Christ, is 'the things that I would not, these I do, and the things that I would, these I do not.' The hunger and thirst after righteousness, imperfect as they are, which are felt at intervals by all men, do not avail to break the awful continuity of their conduct as evil in the sight of God and of their own consciences. And so, just because every man knows something of the sting of this desire after righteousness, which yet remains for the most part unfulfilled, the world is full of sadness. 'Oh, wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' comes to be the expression of the noblest amongst us. Then this great Gospel comes to us, and the Nazarene confidently fronts a world dimly conscious of its need, and sometimes miserable because it is bad, and says: 'Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters ... Come to Me, and drink.'

What right had He to stand thus and promise that every desire after goodness should be fulfilled in Him? He had the right, because He Himself had the power and the purpose to fulfil it. For this is the very heart of His Gospel: that He will give to every one who asks it that spirit of life which was His own, and which 'shall make us free from the law of sin and death.'

Thus, dear friends, we have to be content to take the place of recipients, and to accept, not to work out for ourselves, this righteousness for which, more or less feebly and all of us too feebly, we do sometimes long. Oh, believe me away from Him you will never receive into your characters a goodness that will satisfy yourselves. Siberian prisoners sometimes break their chains and escape for some distance. They are generally taken back and again shut up in their captivity. If we are able, as we are in some measure, to break the bondage of evil in ourselves, we are not able to complete our emancipation by any skill, effort, or act of ours. We must be content to receive the blessing. There is no loom of earth which can weave, and no needle that man's hands can use which can stitch together, the pure garment that befits a soul. We must be content to take the robe of righteousness which Jesus Christ has wrought, and to strip off, by His help, the ancient self, splashed with the filth of the world, and spotted by the flesh: and to 'put on the new man,' which Christ, and Christ alone, bestows.

As for the future fulfilment of this promise — desire will live in heaven, desire will dilate the spirit, the dilated spirit will be capable of fuller gifts of Godlikeness, and increased capacity will ensure increased reception. Thus, through eternity, in blessed alternation, we shall experience the desire that brings new gifts and the satisfying that produces new desires.

Dear friends, all that I have been trying to say in this sermon is gathered up into the one word — 'that I may be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.'

MT 5:7 THE FIFTH BEATITUDE

Alexander Maclaren

THE divine simplicity of the Beatitudes covers a divine depth, both in regard to the single precepts and to the sequence of the whole. I have already pointed out that the first of the series is to be regarded as the root and germ of all the subsequent ones. If for a moment we set it aside and consider only the fruits which are successively developed from it, we shall see that the remaining

members of the sequence are arranged in pairs, of which each contains, first, a characteristic more inward and relating to the deep things of individual religion; and, second, a characteristic which has its field of action in our relations to men. For example, the 'mourners' and the 'meek' are paired. Those who 'hunger and thirst after righteousness' and the 'merciful' are paired. 'The pure in heart' and 'the peacemakers' are paired.

Now that sequence can scarcely be accidental. It is the application in detail of the great principle which our Lord endorsed in its Old Testament form when He said that the first great commandment, the love of God, had a companion consequent on and like unto it, the love of our neighbour. Religion without beneficence, and beneficence without religion, are equally maimed. The one is a root without fruit, and the other a fruit without a root. The selectest emotions, the lowliest faith, the loftiest aspirations, the deepest consciousness of one's own unworthiness — these priceless elements of personal religion — are of little worth unless there are inseparably linked with them meekness, mercifulness, and peacemaking. 'What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.' If any Christian people have neglected the service of man for the worship of God, they are flying in the face of Christ's teaching. If any antagonists of Christianity attack it on the ground that it fosters such neglect, they mistake the system that they criticise, and are judging it by the imperfect practice of the disciples instead of by the perfect precepts of the Master.

So, then, here we have a characteristic lodged in the very heart of this series of Beatitudes which refers wholly to our demeanour to one another. My remarks now will, therefore, be of a very homely, commonplace, and practical kind.

I. Note the characteristic on which our Lord here pours out His blessing — Mercy.

Now, like all the other members of this sequence, with the exception, perhaps, of the last, this quality refers to disposition much rather than to action. Conduct is included, of course; but conduct only secondarily. Jesus Christ always puts conduct second, as all wise and great teachers do. 'As a man thinketh in his heart so is he.' That is the keynote of all noble morality. And none has ever carried it out more thoroughly than has the morality of the Gospel. It is a poor translation and limitation of this great word which puts in the foreground merely merciful actions. The mercifulness of my text is, first and foremost, a certain habitual way of looking at and feeling towards men, especially to men in suffering and need, and most especially to men who have proved themselves bad and blameworthy. It is implied that a rigid retribution would lead to severer methods of judgment and of action.

Therefore the first characteristic of the merciful man is that he is merciful in his judgments; not making the worst of people, no Devil's Advocate in his estimates of his fellows; but, endlessly, and, as the world calls it, foolishly and incredibly, gentle in his censures, and ever ready to take the charitable — which is generally the truer — construction of acts and motives. That is a very threadbare thought, brother, but the way to invest commonplace with startling power is to bring it into immediate connection with our own life and conduct. And if you will try to walk by this threadbare commonplace for a week, I am mistaken if you do not find out that it has teeth to bite and a firm grip to lay upon you. Threadbare truth is not effete until it is obeyed, and when we try to obey it, it ceases to be commonplace.

Again, I may remind you that this mercifulness, which is primarily an inward emotion, and a way, as I said, of thinking of, and of looking at, unworthy people, must necessarily, of course, find its manifestation in our outward conduct. And there will be, what I need not dilate upon, a readiness to help, to give, to forgive not only offences against society and morality, but offences against ourselves.

I need not dwell longer upon this first part of my subject. I wished mainly to emphasise that to begin with action, in our understanding of mercifulness, is a mistake; and that we must clear our hearts of antipathies, and antagonisms, and cynical suspicions, if we would inherit the blessings of our text.

Before I go further, I would point out the connection between this incumbent duty of mercifulness and the preceding virtue of meekness. It is hard enough to bear 'the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes,' without one spot of red in the cheek, one perturbation or flush of anger in the heart; and to do that might task us all to the utmost. But that is not all that Christ's ethics require of us. It is not sufficient to exercise the passive virtue of meekness; there must be the active one of mercifulness. And to call for that is to lay an additional weight upon our consciences, and to strain and stretch still further the obligator under which we come. We have not done what the worst men and our most malicious enemies have a right to receive from us when we say, with the cowardly insincerity of the world, 'I can forgive but I cannot forget.' That is no forgiveness, and that is no mercifulness. It is not enough to stand still, unresisting. There must be a hand of helpfulness stretched out, and a gush of pity and mercifulness in the heart, if we are to do what our Master has done for us all, and what our Master requires us to do for one another. Mercifulness is the active side of the passive meekness.

Further, in a word, I would note here another thing, and that is — what a sad, stern, true view of the condition of men in the world

results from noticing that the only three qualities in regard to our relation to them which Christ sets in this sevenfold tiara of diamonds are meekness in the face of hatred and injustice; mercifulness in the face of weakness and wickedness; peacemaking in the face of hostility and wrangling. What a world in which we have to live, where the crowning graces are those which presuppose such vices as do these! Ah! dear friends, 'as sheep in the midst of wolves' is true to-day. And the one conquering power is patient gentleness, which recompenses all evil with good, and is the sole means of transforming and thus overcoming it.

People talk a great deal, and a good deal of it very insincerely, about their admiration for these precepts gathered together in this chapter. If they would try to live them for a fortnight, they would perhaps pause a little longer than some of them do before they said, as do people that detest the theology of the Testament, 'The Sermon on the Mount is my religion: Is it? It does not look very like it. At all events, if it is, it is a religion behind which practice most wofully limps.

II. Let me ask you to look at what I have already in part referred to — the place in this series which Mercifulness holds.

Now, of course, I know, and nothing that I say now is to be taken for a moment as questioning or underestimating it, that, altogether apart from religion, there is interwoven into the structure of human nature that sentiment of mercifulness which our Lord here crowns with His benediction. But it is not that natural, instinctive sentiment — which is partially unreliable, and has little power apart from the reinforcement of higher thoughts to carry itself consistently through life — that our Lord is here speaking about; but it is a mercifulness which is more than an instinct, more than a sentiment, more than the natural answer of the human heart to the sight of compassion and distress, which is, in fact, the product of all that has preceded it in this linked chain of characteristics and their blessings.

And so I ask you to recall these. 'Poor in spirit,' 'mourning,' 'meek,' 'hungering and thirsting after righteousness' — these are the springs that feed the flow of this river; and if it be not fed from them, but from the surface-waters of human sentiment and instinct, it will dry up long before it has availed to refresh barren places, and to cool thirsty lips. And note also the preceding promises, 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven'; 'they shall be comforted'; 'they shall inherit the earth'; 'they shall be filled.' These are experiences which, again, are another collection of the head-waters of this stream.

That is to say, the true, lasting, reliable, conquering mercifulness has a double source. The consciousness of our own weakness, the sadness that creeps over the heart when it makes the discovery of its own sin, the bowed submission primarily to the will of God, and secondarily to the antagonisms which, in subservience to that will, we may meet in life, and the yearning desire for a fuller righteousness and a more lustrous purity in our own lives and characters — these are the experiences which will make a man gentle in his judgment of his brother, and full of melting charity in all his dealings with him. If I know how dark my own nature is, how prone to uncommitted evils, how little I have to thank myself for the virtues that I have practised, which are largely due to my exemption from temptation and to my opportunities, and how little I have in my own self that I can venture to bring to the stern judgment which I am tempted to apply to other people, then the words of censure will falter on my tongue, and the bitter construction of my brother's conduct and character will be muffled in silence. 'Except as to open outbreakings,' said one of the very saintliest of men, 'I want nothing of what Judas and Cain had.' If we feel this, we shall ask ourselves, 'Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?' and the condemnation of others will stick in our throats when we try to utter it.

And, on the other hand, if I, through these paths of self-knowledge, and lowly estimate of self, and penitent confession of sin, and flexibility of will to God, and yearning, as for my highest food and good, after a righteousness which I feel I do not possess, have come into the position in which my poverty is, by His gift, made rich, and the tears are wiped away from off my face by His gracious hand, and a full possession of large blessings bestowed on my humble will, and the righteousness for which I long imparted to me, shall I not have learned how divine a thing it is to give to the unworthy, and so be impelled to communicate what I have already received? 'Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love as Christ also hath loved us.' They only are deeply, through and through, universally and always merciful who have received mercy. The light is reflected at the same angle as it fails, and the only way by which there can come from our faces and lives a glory that shall lighten many dark hearts, and make sunshine in many a shady place, is that these hearts shall have turned full to the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance, and so 'have received of the Lord that which also' they 'deliver' unto men.

And so, brethren, there are two plain, practical exhortations from these thoughts. One is, let us Christian people learn the fruits of God's mercy, and be sure of this, that our own mercifulness in regard to men is an accurate measure of the amount of the divine mercy which we have received. The other is, let all of us learn the root of man's mercy to men. There is plenty, of a sort, of philanthropy and beneficent and benevolent work and feeling to-day, entirely apart from all perception of, and all faith in, the Gospel of Jesus Christ in so far as the individuals who exercise that beneficence are concerned. I, for my part, am narrow enough to believe that the streams of non-Christian charitableness, which run in our land and in other lands to-day, have been fed from

Christ's fountain, though the supply has come underground, and bursts into light apparently unconnected with its source. If there had been no New Testament there would have been very little of the beneficence which flouts the New Testament to-day. Historically, it is the great truths, which we conveniently summarise as being evangelical Christianity, that have been mother to the new charity that, since Christ, has been breathed over the world. I, for my part, believe that if you strike out the doctrine of universal sinfulness, if you cover over the Cross of Christ, if you do not find in it the manifestation of a God who is endlessly merciful to the most unworthy, you have destroyed the basis on which true and operative benevolence will rest. So thou, dear brethren, let us all seek to get a humbler and a truer conception of what we ourselves are, and a loftier and truer faith of what God in Christ is; and then to remember that if we have these, we are bound to, and we shall, show that we have them, by making that which is the anchor of our hope the pattern of our lives.

III. Lastly, notice the requital, 'They shall obtain mercy.'

Now, it is a wretched weakening of that great thought to suppose that it means that if A. is merciful to B., B. will be merciful to A. That is sometimes true, and sometimes it is not. It does not so very much matter whether it is true or not; that is not what Jesus Christ means. All these Beatitudes are God's gifts, and this is God's gift too. It is His mercy which the merciful man obtains.

But you say: 'Have you not just been telling us that this sense and experience of God's mercy must precede my mercy, and now you say that my mercy must precede God's?' No; I do not say that it must precede it; I do say that my mercifulness is, as it were, lodged between the segments of a golden circle, and has on one side the experience of the divine mercy which quickens mine by thankfulness and imitation; on the other side, the larger experience of the divine mercy which follows upon my walking after the example of my Lord.

This is only one case of the broad general principle, 'to him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath.' Salvation is no such irreversible gift as that once bestowed a man can go on anyhow and it will continue; but it is given in such a fashion as that, for its retention, and still more for its increase, there must be a certain line of feeling and of action.

Our Lord does not mean to say, of course, that this one isolated member of a series carries with it the whole power of bringing down upon a man the blessings which are only due to the combination of the whole series, but that it stands as one of that linked band which shall receive the blessing from on high. And the blessing here is stated in accordance with the particular Grace in question, according to that great law of retaliation which brings life unto life and death unto death.

No man who, having received the mercy of God, lives harsh, hard, self-absorbed, implacable, and uncommunicative, will keep that mercy in any vivid consciousness or to any blessed issue. The servant took his fellow-servant by the throat, and said, 'Pay me that thou owest,' and his master said, 'Deliver him to the tormentors until he pay the uttermost farthing.' You receive your salvation as a free gift; you keep it by feelings and conduct correspondent to the gift.

Though benevolence which has an eye to self is no benevolence, it is perfectly legitimate, and indeed absolutely necessary, that whilst the motive for mercifulness is mercy received, the encouragement to mercifulness should be mercy still to be given. 'Walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us'; and when you think of your own unworthiness, and of the great gifts which a gracious God has given, let these impel you to move amongst men as copies of God, and be sure that you deepen your spiritual life, not only by meditation and by faith, but by practical work, and by showing towards all men mercy like the mercy which God has bestowed upon you.

MT 5:8 THE SIXTH BEATITUDE

Alexander Maclaren

AT first hearing one scarcely knows whether the character described in this great saying, or the promise held out, is the more inaccessible to men. 'The pure in heart': who may they be? Is there one of us that can imagine himself possessed of a character fitting him for the vision of God, or such as to make him bear with delight that dazzling blaze? 'They shall see God,' whom 'no man hath seen at any time, nor can see.' Surely the requirement is impossible, and the promise not less so. But does Jesus Christ mock us with demands that cannot be satisfied, and dangle before us hopes that can never be realised? There have been many moralists and would-be teachers who have done that. What would be the use of saying to a man lying on a battlefield sore wounded, and with both legs shot off, 'If you will only get up and run, you will be safe'? What would be the use of telling men how blessed they would be if they were the opposite of what they are? But that is not Christ's way.

These words, lofty and remote as they seem, are in truth amongst the most hopeful and radiant that ever came from even His lips. For they offer the realisation of an apparently impossible character, they promise the possession of an apparently impossible vision; and they soothe fears, and tell us that the sight from which, were it possible, we should sometimes fain shrink, is the source of our

purest gladness. So there are three things, it seems to me, worth our notice in these great words — How hearts can be made pure; how the pure heart can see God; and how the sight can be simple blessedness.

I. How hearts can be made pure.

Now, the key which has unlocked for us, in previous sermons, the treasures of meaning in these Beatitudes, is especially necessary here. For, as I have said, if you take this to be a mere isolated saying, it becomes a mockery and a pain. But if you connect it, as our Lord would have us connect it, with all the preceding links of this wreathed chain describing the characteristics of a devout soul, then it assumes an altogether different appearance. 'The pure in heart' are they who have exercised and received the previous qualifications and bestowments from God. That is to say, there must precede all such purity as is capable of the divine vision, the poverty of spirit which recognises its true condition, the mourning which rightly feels the gravity and awfulness of that condition, the desire for its opposite, which will never be the 'hunger and thirst' of a soul, except it is preceded by a profound sense of sin and the penitence that ensues thereupon.

But when these things have gone before, and when they have been accompanied, as they surely will be, with the results that flow from them without an interval of time — viz, enrichment with possession of the kingdom, the comforting and drying of the tears of penitence, and the possession of a righteousness bestowed because it is desired, and not won because it is worked for — then, and only then, will the heart be purged and defecated from its evils and its self-regard, and its eyes opened and couched and strengthened to behold undazzled the eternal light of God. The word of my text, standing alone, ministers despair. Regarded where Christ set it, as one of the series of characteristics which He has been describing, it kindles the brightest and surest hope.

'Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?' No; but God can change them; and the implication of my text, regarded in its due relation to these other Beatitudes, is just that the requisite purity is not of man's working, but is God's gift. The same truth which here results from the study of the place of our text in this series is condensed into a briefer, but substantially equivalent, form in the saying of another part of the New Testament, about 'purifying their hearts by faith.'

Dear brethren, we come back to the old truth — all a man's hope of, and effort after, reformation and self-improvement must begin with the consciousness of sin, the lament over it, the longing for divine goodness, the opening of the heart for the reception thereof; and only then can we rise to these serene heights of purity of heart. This, and this alone, is the way by which 'a clean thing' can be brought 'out of an unclean one,' and men stained and foul with evil, and bound under the chains of that which is the mother of all evil, the undue making themselves the centres of their lives, can be washed and cleansed and emancipated, and God be made the end and the aim, the motive and the goal, the power and the reward, of all their work. Righteousness is a gift to begin with, and it is a gift bestowed on condition of 'repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.' We all have longings after purity, suppressed, dashed, contradicted a thousand times in our lives day by day, but there they are; and the only way by which they can be fully satisfied is when we go with our foul hands, empty as well as foul, and lift them up to God, and say, 'Give what Thou commandest, even the clean heart, and we shall be clean.'

But then, do not let us forget, either, that this gift bestowed not once and for ever, but continuously if there be continuous desire, is to be utilised, appropriated, worked into our characters, and worked out in our lives, by our own efforts, as well as by our own faith. 'Having, therefore, these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord.' 'Every man that hath this' gift bestowed, 'purifieth himself even as He is pure.' He that brings to us the gift of regeneration, by which we receive the new nature which is free from sin, calls to each of us as He presents to us the basin with the cleansing water, 'Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings;... cease to do evil, learn to do well.' 'What God hath joined together let not man put asunder,' viz. the act of faith by which we receive, the act of diligence by which we use, the purifying power.

II. Note how the pure heart sees God.

One is tempted to plunge into mystical depths when speaking upon such a text as this, but I wish to resist the temptation now, and to deal with it in a plain, practical fashion. Of course I need not remind you, or do more than simply remind you, that the matter in question here is no perception by sense of Him who is invisible, nor is it, either, an adequate and direct knowledge and comprehension of Him who is infinite, and whom a man can no more comprehend than he can stretch his short arms round the flaming orb of the central sun. But still, there is a relation to God possible for sinful men when they have been purified through the faith that is in Jesus Christ, which is so direct, so immediate, that it deserves the name of vision; and which, as I believe, is the ground of a firmer certitude, and of a no less clear apprehension, than is the sense from which the name is borrowed. For the illusions of sense have no place in the sight which the pure heart has of its Father, God.

Only, remember that here, and in the interpretation of all such Scriptural words, we have ever to be guided and governed by the great principle which our Lord laid down, under very solemn circumstances, when He said: 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.' Jesus Christ, whose name from eternity is the Word, is, from eternity to eternity, that which the name indicates — viz, the revealing activity of the eternal God. And, as I believe, wherever there have been kindled in men's hearts, either by the contemplation of nature and providence, or by the intuitions of their own spirits, any glints or glimpses of a God, there has been the operation of 'the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.' And far beyond the limits of historical Revelation within Israel, as recorded in Scripture, that Eternal Word has been unveiling, as men's dim eyes were capable of perceiving it, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. But for us who stand in the full blaze of that historical manifestation in the character and work of Jesus Christ our Saviour, our vision of God is neither more nor less than the apprehension and the realisation of Christ as 'God manifest in the flesh.'

Whether you call it the vision of God, or whether you call it communion with God in Jesus Christ, or whether you fall back upon the other metaphor of God dwelling in us and we dwelling in God, it all comes to the same thing, the consciousness of His presence, the realisation of His character, the blessed assurance of loving relations with Him, and the communion in mind, heart, will, and conduct, with God who has come near to us all in Jesus Christ.

Now, I need not remind you, I suppose, that for such a realisation and active, real communion, purity of heart is indispensable. That is no arbitrary requirement, but inherent, as we all know, in the very nature of the case. If we think of what He is, we shall feel that only the pure in heart can really pass into loving fellowship with Him. 'How can two walk together except they be agreed?' And if we reflect upon the history of our own feelings and realisation of God's presence with us, we shall see that impurity always drew a membrane over the eye of our souls, or cast a mist of invisibility over the heavens. The Smallest sin hides God from us. A very, very little grain of dye stuff will darken miles of a river, and make it incapable of reflecting the blue sky and the sparkling stars. The least evil done and loved blurs and blots, if it does not eclipse, for us the doers the very Sun of Righteousness Himself. No sinful men can walk in the midst of that fiery furnace and not be consumed. 'The pure in heart' — and only they — 'shall see God.'

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, that in this, as in all these Beatitudes, the germinal fulfilment in the present life is not to be parted off by a great gap from the perfect fulfilment in the life which is to come. And so I do not dwell so much on the differences, great and wonderful as these must necessarily be, between the manner of apprehension and communion with God which it is reserved for heaven to bestow upon us, and the manner of those which we may enjoy here; but I rather would point to the blessed thought that in essence they are one, however in degree they may be different. No doubt, changed circumstances, new capacities, the withdrawal of time and sense, the dropping away of the veil of flesh, which is the barrier between us and the unseen order of things in which 'we live and move and have our being,' will induce changes and progresses in the manner and in the degree of that vision about which it would be folly for us to speak. If there were anything here with which we could compare the state of the blessed in heaven, in so far as it differs from their state on earth, we could form some conception of these differences; but if there were anything here with which we could compare it, it would be less glorious than it is. It is well that we should have to say, 'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things that God hath prepared.' So let us be thankful that 'it doth not yet appear what we shall be'; and let us never allow our ignorance of the manner to make us doubt or neglect the fact, seeing that we know 'that when He shall appear.., we shall see Him as He is.'

III. Lastly, notice how this sight brings blessedness.

There is nothing else that will 'satisfy the eye with seeing.' The vision of God, even in that incipient and imperfect form which is possible upon earth, is the one thing that will calm our distractions, that will supply our needs, that will lift our lives to a level of serene power and blessedness, unattainable by any other way. Such a sight will dim all the dazzling illusions of earth, as, when the sun leaps into the heavens, the stars hide their faces and faint into invisibility. It will make us lords of ourselves, masters of the world, kings over time and sense and the universe. Everything will be different when 'earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God.' That is what is possible for a Christian holding fast by Jesus Christ, and in Him having communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Brethren, I venture to say no word about the blessedness of that future. Heaven's golden gates keep their secret well. Even the purest joys of earth, about which poets have sung for untold centuries, after all singing need to be tasted before they are conceived of; and all our imaginings about the blessedness yonder is but like what a chrysalis might dream in its tomb as to the life of the radiant winged creature which it would one day become.

Let us be content to be ignorant, and believe with confidence that we shall find that the vision of God is the heaven of heavens.

We shall owe that eternal vision to the eternal Revealer; for, as I believe, Scripture teaches us that it is only in Him that the glorified saints see the Father, as it is only in Him that here on earth we have the vision of God. That sight is not, like the bodily sense to which it is compared, a far-off perception of an un-grasped brightness, but it is the actual possession of what we behold. We see God when we have God. When we have God we have enough.

But I dare not close without one other word. There is a vision of God possible to an impure heart, in which there is no blessedness. There comes a day in which 'they shall call upon the rocks to fall and cover them from the face of Him that sits upon the throne.' The alternative is before each of us, dear friends—either 'every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him; and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him'; or, 'I shall behold Thy face in righteousness. I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness.' If we cry, 'Create a clean heart in me, O God!' He will answer, 'I will give you a new heart, and take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh, and I will pour clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean.'

Mt 5:9 THE SEVENTH BEATITUDE

Alexander Maclaren

'Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.' Matthew 5:9.

THIS is the last Beatitude descriptive of the character of the Christian. There follows one more, which describes his reception by the world. But this one sets the top stone, the shining apex, upon the whole temple-structure which the previous Beatitudes had been gradually building up. You may remember that I have pointed out in previous sermons how all these various traits of the Christian life are deduced from 'the root of poverty of spirit. You may also remember how I have had occasion to show that if we consider that first Beatitude, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit,' as the root and mother of all the rest, the remainder are so arranged as that we have alternately a grace which regards mainly the man himself and his relations to God, and one which also includes his relations to man.

Now there are three of these which look out into the world, and these three are consummated by this one of my text. These are 'the meek,' which describes a man's attitude to opposition and hatred; 'the merciful,' which describes his indulgence in judgment and his pitifulness in action; and 'the peacemakers.' For Christian people are not merely to bear injuries and to recompense them with pity and with love, but they are actively to try to bring about a wholesomer and purer state of humanity, and to breathe the peace of God, which passes understanding, over all the janglings and struggles of this world.

So, I think, if we give a due depth of significance to that name 'peacemaker,' we shall find that this grace worthily completes the whole linked series, and is the very jewel which clasps the whole chain of Christian and Christlike characteristics.

I. How are Christ's peacemakers made?

Now there are certain people whose natural disposition has in it a fine element, which diffuses soothing and concord all around them. I dare say we all have known such — perhaps some good woman, without any very shining gifts of intellect, who yet dwelt in such peace of heart herself that conflict and jangling were rebuked in her presence. And there are other people who love peace, and seek after it in the cowardly fashion of letting

things alone; whose 'peace-making' has no nobler source than hatred of trouble, and a wish to let sleeping dogs lie. These, instead of being peacemakers, are war-makers, for they are laying up materials for a tremendous explosion some day.

But it is a very different temper that Jesus Christ has in view here, and I need only ask you to do again what we have had occasion to do in the previous sermons of this series — to link this characteristic with those that go before it, of which it is regarded as being the bright and consummate flower and final outcome. No man can bring to others that which he does not possess. Vainly will he whose own heart is torn by contending passions, whose own life is full of animosities and unreconciled outstanding causes of alienation and divergence between him and God, between him and duty, between him and himself, ever seek to shed any deep or real peace amongst men. He may superficially solder some external quarrels, but that is not all that Jesus Christ means. His peacemakers are created by having passed through all the previous experiences which the preceding verses bring out. They have learned the poverty of their own spirits. They have wept tears, if not real and literal, yet those which are far more agonising — tears of spirit and conscience — when they have thought of their own demerits and foulnesses. They have bowed in humble submission to the will of God, and even to that will as expressed by the antagonisms of man. They have yearned after the possession of a fuller and nobler righteousness than they have attained. They have learned to judge others with a gentle judgment because they know how much they themselves need it, and to extend to others a helping hand because they are aware of their own impotence and need of succour. They have been led through all these, often painful, experiences into a purity of heart which has been blessed by some measure of vision of God; and, having thus been equipped and prepared, they are fit to go out into the world and say, in the presence of all its tempests, 'Peace! be still.' Something of the miracle-working energy of the Master whom they serve will be shed upon those who serve Him.

Brethren, the peacemaker who is worthy of the name must have gone through these deep spiritual experiences. I do not say that they are to come in regular stages, separable from each other. That is not the way in which a character mounts towards God. It does so not by a flight of steps, at distinctly different elevations, but rather by an ascending slope. And, although these various Christian graces which precede that of my text are separable in thought, and are linked in the fashion that our Lord sets forth in experience, they may be, and often are, contemporaneous.

But whether separated from one another in time or not, whether this life-preparation, of which the previous verses give us the outline, has been realised drop by drop, or whether it has been all flooded on to the soul at once, as it quite possibly has, in some fashion or other it must precede our being the sort of peacemakers that Christ desires and blesses.

There is only one more point that I would make here before I go on, and that is, that it is well to notice that the climax of Christian character, according to Jesus Christ Himself, is found in our relations to men, and not in our relation to God. Worship of heart and spirit, devout emotions of the sacreddest, sweetest, most hallowed and hallowing sort, are absolutely indispensable, as I have tried to show you. But equally, if not more, important is it for us to remember that the purest communion with God, and the selectest emotional experiences of the Christian life, are meant to be the bases of active service; and that, if such service does not follow these, there is good reason for supposing that these are spurious, and worth very little. The service of man is the outcome of the love of God. He who begins with poverty of spirit is perfected when, forgetting himself, and coming down from the mountain-top, where the Shekinah cloud of the Glory and the audible voice are, he plunges into the struggles of the multitude below, and frees the devil-ridden boy from the demon that possesses him. Begin by all means with poverty of spirit, or you will never get to this — 'Blessed are the peacemakers.' But see to it that poverty of spirit leads to the meekness, the mercifulness, the peace-bringing influence which Christ has pronounced blessed.

II. What is the peace which Christ's peacemakers bring?

This is a very favourite text with people that know very little of the depths of Christianity. They fancy that it appeals to common sense and men's natural consciences, apart altogether from minutenesses of doctrine or of Christian experience. They are very much mistaken. No doubt there is a surface of truth, but only a surface, in the application that is generally given to these words of our text, as if it meant nothing more than 'he is a good man that goes about and tries to make contending people give up their quarrels, and produces a healing atmosphere of tranquillity wherever he goes.' That is perfectly true, but there is a great deal more in the text than that. If we consider the Scriptural usage of this great word 'peace,' and all

the ground that it covers in human experience; if we remember that it enters as an element into Christ's own name, the 'Peace-Bringer,' the 'Prince of Peace'; and if we notice, as I have already done, the place which this Beatitude occupies in the series, we shall be obliged to look for some far deeper meaning before we can understand the sweep of our Lord's intention here.

I do not think that I am going one inch too far, or forcing meanings into His words which they are not intended to bear, when I say that the first characteristic of the peace, which His disciples have been passed through their apprenticeship in order to fit them to bring, is the peace of reconciliation with God. The cause of all the other fightings in the world is that men's relation to the Father in heaven is disturbed, and that, whilst there flow out from Him only amity and love, these are met by us with antagonism often, with opposition of will often, with alienation of heart often, and with indifference and forgetfulness almost uniformly. So the first thing to be done to make men at peace with one another and with themselves is to rectify their relation to God, and bring peace there.

We often hear in these days complaints of Christian Churches and Christian people because they do not fling themselves, with sufficient energy to please the censors, into movements which are intended to bring about happier relations in society. The longest way round is sometimes the shortest way home. It does not belong to all of us Christians, and I doubt whether it belongs to the Christian Church as such at all, to fling itself into the movements to which I have referred. But if a man go and carry to men the great message of a reconciled and a reconciling God manifest in Jesus Christ, and bringing peace between men and God, he will have done more to sweeten society and put an end to hostility than I think he will be likely to do by any other method. Christian men and women, whatever else you and I are here for, we are here mainly that we may preach, by lip and life, the great message that in Christ is our peace, and that God 'was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.'

We are not to leave out, of course, that which is so often taken as being the sole meaning of the great word of my text. There is much that we are all bound to do to carry the tranquillising and soothing influences of Gospel principles and of Christ's example into the littlenesses of daily life. Any fool can stick a lucifer match into a haystack and make a blaze. It is easy to promote strife. There is a malicious love of it in us all; and ill-natured

gossip has a great deal to do in bringing it about. But it takes something more to put the fire out than it did to light it, and there is no nobler office for Christians than to seek to damp down all these devil's flames of envy and jealousy and mutual animosity. We have to do it, first, by making very sure that we do not answer scorn with scorn, gibes with gibes, hate with hate, but 'seek to overcome

evil with good.' It takes two to make a quarrel, and your most hostile antagonist cannot break the peace unless you help him. If you are resolved to keep it, kept it will be.

May I say another word? I think that our text, though it goes a good deal deeper, does also very plainly tell us Christian folk what is our duty in relation to literal warfare. There is no need for me to discuss here the question as to whether actual fighting with armies and swords is ever legitimate or not, it is a curious kind of Christian duty certainly, if it ever gets to be one. And when one thinks of the militarism that is crushing Europe and driving her ignorant classes to wild schemes of revolution; and when one thinks of the hell of battlefields, of the miseries of the wounded, of mourning widows, of ruined peaceful peasants, of the devil's passions that war sets loose, some of us find it extremely hard to believe that all that is ever in accordance with the mind of Christ. But whether you agree with me in that or no, surely my text points to the duty of the Christian Church to take up a very much more decisive position in reference to the military spirit than, alas! it ever has done. Certainly it does seem to be not very obviously in accordance with Christ's teachings that men-of-war should be launched with a religious service, or that Te Deums should be sung because thousands have been killed. It certainly does seem to be something like a satire on European Christianity that one of the chief lessons we have taught the East is that we have instructed the Japanese how to use Western weapons to fight their enemies. Surely, surely, if Christian churches laid to heart as they ought these plain words of the Master, they would bring their united influence to bear against that demon of war, and that pinchbeck, spurious glory which is connected with it. 'Blessed are the peacemakers': let us try to earn the benediction.

III. Lastly, note the issue of this peacemaking. 'They shall be called the sons of God.' Called? By whom? Christ does not say, but it should not be difficult to ascertain. It seems to me that to suppose that it is by men degrades this promise, instead of making it the climax of the whole series. Besides, it is not true that if a Christian man lives as I have been trying to describe, protesting against certain evils, trying to diffuse an atmosphere of

peace round about him; and, above all, seeking to make known the Name of the great Peacemaker, men will generally call him a 'son of God.' The next verse but one tells us what they will call him. 'Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely for My sake.' They are a great deal more likely to have stones and rotten eggs flung at them than to be pelted with bouquets of scented roses of popular approval. No! no! it is not man's judgment that is meant here. It matters very little what men call us. It matters everything what God calls us. It is He who will call them 'sons of God.' So the Apostle John thought that Christ meant, for he very beautifully and touchingly quotes this passage when he says, 'Beloved! behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.'

God's calling is a recognition of men for what they are. God owns the man that lives in the fashion that we have been trying to outline — God owns him for His child; manifestly a son, because he has the Father's likeness. 'Be ye therefore imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love.' God in Christ is the first Peacemaker, and they who go about the world proclaiming His peace and making peace, bear the image of the heavenly, and are owned by God as His sons.

What does that owning mean? Well, it means a great deal which has yet to be disclosed, but it means this, too, that the whisper of the Voice which owns us for children will be heard by ourselves. The Spirit which cries, 'Abba, Father!' will open our ears to hear Him say, 'Thou art My beloved Son.' Or, to put it into plain English, there is no surer way by which we can come to the calm, happy, continual consciousness of being the children of God than by this living like Him, to spread the peace of God over all hearts.

I have said in former sermons that all these promises, which are but the natural outcome of the characteristics to which they are attached, have a double reference, being fulfilled in germ here, and in maturity hereafter. Like the rest, this one has that double reference. For the consciousness, here and now, that we are the children of God is but, as it were, the morning twilight of what shall hereafter be an unsetting meridian sunshine. What depths of divine assimilation, what mysteries of calm, peaceful, filial fellowship, what riches beyond count of divine inheritance, lie in the name of son, the possession of these alone can tell. For the same Apostle, whose comment upon these words we have already quoted, goes on to say, 'It doth not yet appear what we shall be.'

Only we have one assurance, wide enough for all anticipation, and firm enough for solid hope: 'If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.' He must make us sons before we can be called sons of God. He must give us peace with God, with ourselves, with men, with circumstances, before we can go forth effectually to bring peace to others. If He has given us these good things, He has bound us to spread them. Let us do so. And if our peace ever is spoken in vain as regards others, it will come back to us again; and we shall be kept in perfect peace, even in the midst of strife, until we enter at last into the city of peace and serve the King of Peace for ever.

Mt 5:10 THE EIGHTH BEATITUDE

Alexander Maclaren

'Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' — Matthew 5:10.

WE have seen the description of the true subjects of the kingdom growing into form and completeness before our eyes in the

preceding verses, which tell us what they are in their own consciousness, what they are in their longings, what they become in inward nature by God's gift of purity, how they move among men as angels of God, meek, merciful, peace-bringing. Is anything more needed for complete portraiture, any added touch to the picture? Yes — what the world is to them, what are its wages for such work, what its perception of such characters. Their relations to it are those of peace-bringers, reconcilers; its to them are those of hostility and dislike. Blessed are the persecuted for righteousness' sake.

I take these words to be as universal and permanent in their application as any which have preceded them. This characteristic is, like all the others, the result of those which go before it and presupposes their continuous operation. The benediction which is attached is not an arbitrary promise, but stands in as close a relation of consequence to the characteristic as do the others. And it is marked out as the last in the series by being a repetition of the first, to express the idea of completeness, a rounded whole; to suggest that all the others are but elements of this, and that the initial blessing given to the poor in spirit is identical with that which is the reward of the highest Christian character, the one possessing implicitly what the other has in full development.

I. The world's recompense to the peace-bringers.

It may be thought that this clause, at all events, has reference to special epochs only, and especially to the first founding of Christianity. Such a reference, of course, there is. And very remarkable is it how clearly and honestly Christ always warned would-be disciples of what they would earn in this world by following Him.

But He seems to take especial pains to show that He here proclaims a principle of equal generality with the others, by separating the application of it to His immediate hearers which follows in the next verse, from the universal statement in the text. Their individual experience was but to

illustrate the general rule, not to exhaust it. And you remember how frequently the same thought is set forth in Scripture in the most perfectly general terms.

1. Notice that antagonism is inevitable between a true Christian and the world.

Take the character as it is sketched in verses preceding. Point by point it is alien from the sympathies and habits of irreligious men. The principles are different, the practices are different.

A true Christian ought to be a standing rebuke to the world, an incarnate conscience.

There are but two ways of ending that antagonism: either by bringing the world up to Christian character, or letting Christian character down to the world.

2. The certain and uniform result is opposition and dislike — persecution in its reality.

Darkness hateth light.

Some will, no doubt, be touched; there is that in all men which acknowledges how awful goodness is. But the loftier character is not loved by the lower which it loves Aristides 'the Just.' Christ Himself.

As to practice — a righteous life will not make a man 'popular.' And as for 'opinions' — earnest religious opinions of any sort are distasteful. Not the profession of them, but the reality of them — especially those which seem in any way new or strange — make the average man angrily intolerant of an earnest Christianity which takes its creed seriously and insists on testing conventional life by it. Indolence, self-complacency, and inborn conservatism join forces in resenting the presence of such inconvenient enthusiasts, who upset everything and want to 'turn the world upside down.'

'The moping owl cloth to the moon complain

Of such as, wandering near her ivy tower,

Molest her ancient, solitary reign.'

The seeds of the persecuting temper are in human nature, and they germinate in the storms which Christianity brings with it.

3. The phases vary according to circumstances.

We have not to look for the more severe and gross kinds of persecution.

The tendency of the age is to visit no man with penalties for his belief, but to allow the utmost freedom of thought,

The effect of Christianity upon popular morality has been to bring men up towards the standard of Christ's righteousness.

The long proclamation of Christian truth in England has the effect of making mere profession of it a perfectly safe and even proper thing.

But the antagonism remains at bottom the same.

Let a man earnestly accept even the creeds of established religion and live by them, and he will find that out. Let him seek to proclaim and enforce some of those truths of Christianity whose bearing upon social and economical and ecclesiastical questions is but partially understood. Let him set up and stick to a high standard of Christian morality and see what comes of it, in business, say, or in social life.

'All that will live godly will suffer persecution.'

4. The present forms are perhaps not less hard to bear than the old ones.

They are, no doubt, very small in contrast with the lions in the arena or the fires of Smithfield. The curled lip, the civil scorn, the alienation of some whose good opinion we would fain have, or, if we stand in some public position, the poisonous slanders of the press, and the contumacious epithets, are trivial but very real tokens of dislike. We have the assassin's tongue instead of the assassin's dagger. But yet such things may call for as much heroism as braving a rack, and the spirit that shoots out the tongue may be as bad as the spirit that yelled, 'Christianos ad leones.'

5. The great reason why professing Christians now know so little about persecution is because there is so little real antagonism.

'If ye were of the world, the world would love his own.' The Church has leavened the world, but the world has also leavened the Church; and it seems agreed by common consent that there is to be no fanatical goodness of the early primitive pattern. Of course, then, there will be no persecution, where

religion goes in silver slippers, and you find Christian men running neck and neck with others, and no man can tell which is which.

Then, again, many escape by avoiding plain Christian duty, shutting themselves up in their own little coteries.

(a) Let us be sure that we never flinch from our Christian character to buy anybody's good opinion.

It is not for us to lower our flags to whoever fires across our bows. Do you never feel it an effort to avow your principles? Do you never feel that they are being smiled away in society? Are you not flattered by being shown that this religion of yours is the one thing that stands between you and cordial reception by these people?

(b) Let us be sure that it is righteousness and Christ which are the grounds of anything of the sort we have to bear, and not our own faults of temper and character.

(c) Let us be sure that we are not persecutors ourselves. To be so is inherent in human nature.

Men have often been both confessors and inquisitors. The spirit of censorious judgment, of fierce hate, of impatient intolerance, has often disgraced Christian men. It is for us to be only and always meek, merciful peace-bringers; and if men will not accept truth, to seek to win and woo them, not to be angry.

It is very hard to be both firm and tolerant, not letting the foolish heart expand into a lazy glow of benevolence to all beliefs, and so perilling one's own; nor letting intense adherence to our own convictions darken into impotent wrath against their harshest opponents. But let us remember that as God is our great example of mercy, so Christ is our great example of patience, both under the world's unbelief and the world's persecution.

II. God's Gift to the persecuted.

'The kingdom of heaven.'

This last promise is the same as the first — to express completeness, a rounded whole. All the others are but elements of this.

That highest reward given to the perfectest saint is but the fuller possession of what is given in germ to the humblest and sinfullest at the very first. The poor in spirit gets it at the beginning.

It is not implied by this promise that a Christian man's blessedness depends on the accident of some other person's behaviour to him, or that martyrs have a place which none others can reach. But theirs is the kingdom of heaven as a natural result of the character which brings about persecution, and as a natural result of the development of that character which persecution brings about. This promise, like all the others, has its twofold fulfilment.

There is a present recompense.

Persecution is the result of a character which brings Christians into the kingdom. Theirs is the kingdom — they are subjects. To them it is given to enter.

Persecution makes the present consciousness of the possession of the kingdom more vivid and joyous. It brings the enforced sense of a vocation separate from the hostile world's. As Thomas Fuller puts it somewhere, in troublous times the Church builds high, just as the men do in cities where there is little room to expand on the ground level.

Persecution brightens and solidifies hope, and thus may become infinitely sweet and blessed. How often it has been given to the martyr, as it was given to Stephen, to see heaven opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, as if risen to His feet to uphold as well as to receive His servant. Paul and Silas made the prison walls ring with their praises, though their backs were livid with wales and stained with blood. And we, in our far smaller trials for Christ's sake, may have the same more conscious possession of the kingdom and brightened hope of yet fuller possession of it.

There is a future recompense in the perfect kingdom, where men are rewarded according to their capacities. And if the way in which we have met the world's evil has been right, then that will have made us fit for a fuller possession.

In closing we recur to the thought of all these Beatitudes as a chain and the beginning of all as being penitence and faith.

Many a poor man, or many a little child, may have a higher place in heaven than some who have died at the stake for their Lord, for not our history, but our character, determines our place there, and all the fulness of the kingdom belongs to every one who with penitent heart comes to God in Christ, and then by slow degrees from that root brings forth first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.

Here is Jesus' ideal of character — poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted for righteousness' sake. To be these is to be blessed. And here is Jesus' ideal of what, over and above the inherent blessedness of such a character, constitutes the true blessedness of a soul — the possession of the kingdom of heaven, comfort from God, the inheritance of the earth of which the inheritor may not own a yard, full satisfaction of the longing after righteousness, the obtaining of mercy from God, the name of sons of God, and, last as first, the possession of the kingdom of heaven. Is Jesus' ideal yours? Do you believe that such a character is the highest that a man can attain, that in itself it is truly blessed, and will bring about results in contrast with which all baser-born joys are coarse and false? Happy will you be if you so believe, and if so believing you make the ideal which He paints your aim, and therefore secure the blessedness which He attaches to it as your exceeding great reward.

Mt 5:13 SALT WITHOUT SAVOUR

Alexander Maclaren

'Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.' — Matthew 5:13.

THESE words must have seemed ridiculously presumptuous when they were first spoken, and they have too often seemed mere mockery and irony in the ages since. A Galilean peasant, with a few of his rude countrymen who had gathered round him, stands up there on the mountain, and says to them, 'You, a handful, are the people who are to keep the world from rotting, and to bring it to all its best light.' Strange when we think that Christ believed that these men were able to do these grand functions because they drew their power from Himself! Stranger still to think that, notwithstanding all the miserable inconsistencies of the professing Church ever since, yet, on the whole, the experience of history has verified these words! And although some wise men may curl their lips with a sneer as they say about us Christians, 'Ye are the salt of the earth!' yet the most progressive, and the most enlightened, and the most moral portion of humanity has derived its impulse to progress, its enlightenment as to the loftiest truths, and the purest portion of its morality, from the men who received their power to impart these from Jesus Christ.

And so, dear brethren, I have to say two or three things now, which I hope will be plain and earnest and searching, about the function of the Christian Church, and of each individual member of it, as set forth in these words; about the solemn possibility that the qualification for that function may go away from a man; about the grave question as to whether such a loss can ever be repaired; and about the certain end of the saltless salt.

I. First, then, as to the high task of Christ's disciples as here set forth.

'Ye are the salt of the earth!' The metaphor wants very little explanation, however much enforcement it may require. It involves two things: a grave judgment as to the actual state of society, and a lofty claim as to what Christ's followers are able to do to it.

A grave judgment as to the actual state of society — it is corrupt and tending to corruption. You do not salt a living thing. You salt a dead one that it may not be a rotting one. And, Christ says by implication here, what

He says plainly more than once in other places: — ‘Human society, without My influence, is a carcass that is rotting away and disintegrating; and you, faithful handful, who have partially apprehended the meaning of My mission, and have caught something of the spirit of My life, you are to be rubbed into that rotting mass to sweeten it, to arrest decomposition, to stay corruption, to give flavour to its insipidity, and to save it from falling to pieces of its own wickedness. Ye are the salt of the earth.’

Now, it is not merely because we are the bearers of a truth that will do all this that we are thus spoken of, but we Christian men are to do it by the influence of conduct and character.

There are two or three thoughts suggested by this metaphor. The chief one is that of our power, and therefore our obligation, to arrest the corruption round us, by our own purity. The presence of a good man hinders the devil from having elbow-room to do his work. Do you and I exercise a repressive influence (if we do not do anything better), so that evil and low toned life is ashamed to show itself in our presence, and skulks back as do wrong-doers from the bull’s-eye of a policeman’s lantern? It is not a high function, but it is a very necessary one, and it is one that all Christian men and women ought to discharge — that of rebuking and hindering the operation of corruption, even if they have not the power to breathe a better spirit into the dead mass.

But the example of Christian men is not only repressive. It ought to tempt forth all that is best and purest and highest in the people with whom they come in contact. Every man who does right helps to make public opinion in favour of doing right; and every man who lowers the standard of morality in his own life helps to lower it in the community of which he is a part. And so in a thousand ways that I have no need to dwell upon here, the men that have Christ in their hearts and something of Christ’s conduct and character repeated in theirs are to be the preserving and purifying influence in the midst of this corrupt world.

There are two other points that I name, and do not enlarge upon. The first of them is — salt does its work by being brought into close contact with the substance upon which it is to work. And so we, brought into contact as we are with much evil and wickedness, by many common relations of friendship, of kindred, of business, of proximity, of citizenship, and the like, we are not to seek to withdraw ourselves from contact with the evil.

The only way by which the salt can purify is by being rubbed into the corrupted thing.

And once more, salt does its work silently, inconspicuously, gradually. ‘Ye are the light of the world,’ says Christ in the next verse. Light is far-reaching and brilliant, flashing that it may be seen. That is one side of Christian work, the side that most of us like best, the conspicuous kind of it. Ay! but there is a very much humbler, and, as I fancy, a very much more useful, kind of work that we have all to do. We shall never be the ‘light of the world,’ except on condition of being ‘the salt of the earth.’ You have to play the humble, inconspicuous, silent part of checking corruption by a pure example before you can aspire to play the other part of raying out light into the darkness, and so drawing men to Christ Himself.

Now, brethren, why do I repeat all these common, threadbare platitudes, as I know they are? Simply in order to plant upon them this one question to the heart and conscience of you Christian men and women : — Is there anything in your life that makes this text, in its application to you, other else than the bitterest mockery ?

II. The grave possibility of the salt losing its savour.

There is no need for asking the question whether such loss is a physical fact or not, whether in the natural realm it is possible for any forms of matter that have saline taste to lose it any cause. That does not at all concern us. The point is that it is possible for us who call ourselves — and are — Christians, to lose our penetrating pungency, which stays corruption; to lose all that distinguishes us from the men that we are to better.

Now I think that nobody can look upon the present condition of professing Christendom; or, in a narrower aspect, upon the present condition of English Christianity; or in a still narrower, nobody can look round upon this congregation; or in the narrowest view, none of us can look into our own hearts — without feeling that this saying comes perilously near being true of us. And I beg you, dear Christian friends, while I try to dwell on this point, to ask yourselves this question — Lord, is it I? and not to be thinking of other people whom you may suppose the cap will fit.

There is, then, manifest on every side — first of all, the obliteration of the distinction between the salt and the mass into which it is inserted, or to put

it into other words, Christian men and women swallow down bodily, and practise thoroughly, the maxims of the world, as to life, as to what is pleasant and what is desirable, and as to the application of morality to business. There is not a hair of difference in that respect between hundreds and thousands of professing Christian men, and the irreligious man that has his office up the same

staircase. I know, of course, that there are in every communion saintly men and women who are labouring to keep themselves unspotted from the world, but I know too that in every communion there are those, whose religion has next to no influence on their general conduct, and does not even keep them from corruption, to say nothing of making them sources of purifying influence. You cannot lay the flattering unction to your souls that the reason why there is so little difference between the Church and the world to-day is because the world has grown so much better. I know that to a large extent the principles of Christian ethics have permeated the consciousness of a country like this, and have found their way even amongst people who make no profession at all of being Christians. Thank God for it; but that does not explain it all.

If you take a red-hot ball out of a furnace and lay it down upon a frosty moor, two processes will go on — the ball will lose heat and the surrounding atmosphere will gain it. There are two ways by which you equalise the temperature of a hotter and a colder body: the one is by the hot one getting cold, and the other is by the cold one getting hot. If you are not heating the world, the world is freezing you. Every man influences all men round him, and receives influences from them, and if there be not more exports than imports, if there be not more influences and mightier influences raying out from him than are coming into him, he is a poor creature, and at the mercy of circumstances. 'Men must either be hammers or anvil'; — must either give blows or receive them. I am afraid that a great many of us who call ourselves Christians get a great deal more harm from the world than we ever dream of doing good to it. Remember this, 'you are the salt of the earth,' and if you do not salt the world, the world will rot you.

Is there any difference between your ideal of happiness and the irreligious one? Is there any difference between your notion of what is pleasure, and the irreligious one? Is there any difference in your application of the rules of morality to daily life, any difference in your general way of looking at things from the way of the ungodly world? Yes, or No? Is the salt being infected by the carcass, or is it purifying the corruption? Answer the question, brother, as before God and your own conscience.

Then there is another thing. There can be no doubt but that all round and shared by us, there are instances of the cooling of the fervour of Christian devotion. That is the reason for the small distinction in character and conduct between the world and the Church to-day. An Arctic climate will not grow tropical fruits, and if the heat have been let down, as it has been let down, you cannot expect the glories of character and the pure unworldliness of conduct that you would have had at a higher temperature. Nor is there any doubt but that the present temperature is, with some of us, a distinct loss of heat. It was not always so low. The thermometer has gone down.

There are, no doubt, some among us who had once a far more vigorous Christian life than they have today; who were once far more aflame with the love of God than they are now. And although I know, of course, that as years go on emotion will become less vivid, and feeling may give place to principle, yet I know no reason why, as years go on, fervour should become less, or the warmth of our love to our Master should decline. There will be less spluttering and crackling when the fire burns up; there may be fewer flames; but there will be a hotter glow of ruddy, unflaming heat, That is what ought to be in our Christian experience.

Nor can there be any doubt, I think, but that the partial obliteration of the distinction between the Church and the world, and the decay of the fervour of devotion which leads to it, are both to be traced to a yet deeper cause, and that is the loss or diminution of actual fellowship with Jesus Christ. It was that which made these early disciples 'salt.' It was that which made them 'light.' It is that, and that alone, which makes devotion burn fervid, and which makes characters glow with the strange saintliness that rebukes iniquity, and works for the purifying of the world. And so I would remind you that fellowship with Jesus Christ is no vague exercise of the mind but is to be cultivated by three things, which I fear men are becoming less and less habitual amongst professing Christians: — Meditation, the study of the Bible, private prayer. If you have not these — and you know best whether you have them or not — no power in heaven or earth can prevent you from losing the savour that makes you salt.

III. Now I come to the next point, and that is the solemn question: Is there a possibility of re-salting the saltless salt, of restoring the lost savour?

'Wherewithal shall it be salted?' says the Master. That is plain enough, but do not let us push it too far. If the Church is meant for the purifying of the world, and the Church itself needs purifying, is there any power in the world that will do it? If the army joins the rebels, is there any force that will bring back the army to submission? Our Lord is speaking about ordinary means and agencies. He is saying in effect, if the one thing that is intended to preserve the meat loses its power, is there anything lying about that will salt that? So far, then, the answer seems to be — No.

But Christ has no intention that these words should be pushed to the extreme of asserting that if salt loses its savour, if a man loses the pungency of his Christian life, he cannot win it back, by going again to the source from which he received it at first. There is no such implication in these words. There is no obstacle in the way of a penitent returning to the fountain of all power and purity, nor of the full restoration of the lost savour, if a man will only bring about a full reunion of himself with the source of the savour.

Dear brethren, the message is to each of us; the same pleading words, which the Apocalyptic seer heard from Heaven, come to you and me: 'Remember, therefore, from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works.' And all the savour and the

sweetness that flow from fellowship with Jesus Christ will come back to us in larger measure than ever, if we will come back to the Lord. Repentance and returning will bring back the saltness to the salt, and the brilliancy to the light.

IV. But one last word warns us what is the certain end of the saltless salt.

As the other Evangelist puts it: 'It is neither good for the land nor for the dunghill.' You cannot put it upon the soil; there is no fertilising virtue in it. You cannot even fling it into the rubbish-heap; it will do mischief there. Pitch it out into the road; it will stop a cranny somewhere between the stones when once it is well trodden down by men's heels. That is all it is fit for. God has no use for it, man has no use for it. If it has failed in doing the only thing it was created for, it has failed altogether. Like a knife that will not cut, or a lamp that will not burn, which may have a beautiful handle, or a beautiful stem, and may be highly artistic and decorated; but the question is, Does it cut, does it burn? If not, it is a failure altogether, and in this world there is no room for failures. The poorest living thing of the lowest type will jostle the dead thing out of the way. And so, for the salt that has lost its savour, there is only one thing to be done with it — cast it out, and tread it under foot.

Yes; where are the Churches of Asia Minor, the patriarchates of Alexandria, of Antioch, of Constantinople; the whole of that early Syrian, Palestinian Christianity: where are they? Where is the Church of North Africa, the Church of Augustine? 'Trodden under foot of men!' Over the archway of a mosque in Damascus you can read the half-obliterated inscription — 'Thy Kingdom, O Christ, is an everlasting Kingdom,' and above it — 'There is no God but God, and Mohammed is His prophet!' The salt has lost his savour, and been cast out.

And does any one believe that the Churches of Christendom are eternal in their present shape? I see everywhere the signs of disintegration in the existing embodiments and organisations that set forth Christian life. And I am sure of this, that in the days that are coming to us, the storm in which we are already caught, all dead branches will be whirled out of the tree. So much the better for the tree! And a great deal that calls itself organised Christianity will have to go down because there is not vitality enough in it to stand. For you know it is low vitality that catches all the diseases that are going; and it is out of the sick sheep's eye-holes that the ravens peck the eyes. And it will be the feeble types of spiritual life, the inconsistent Christianities of our churches, that will yield the crop of apostates and heretics and renegades, and that will fall before temptation.

Brethren, remember this: Unless you go back close to your Lord, you will go further away from Him. The deadness will deepen, the coldness will become icier and icier; you will lose more and more of the life, and show less and less of the likeness, and purity, of Jesus Christ until you come to this — I pray God that none of us come to it — 'Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.' Dead!

My brother, let us return unto the Lord our God, and keep nearer Him than we ever have done, and bring our hearts more under the influence of His grace, and cultivate the habit of communion with Him; and pray and trust, and leave ourselves in His hands, that His power may come into us, and that we in the beauty of our characters, and the purity of our lives, and the elevation of our spirits, may witness to all men that we have been with Christ; and may, in some measure, check the corruption that is in the world through lust.

Mt 5:14-16 THE LAMP AND THE BUSHEL

Alexander Maclaren

'Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. 15. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. 16. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.' — Matthew 5:14-16.

THE conception of the office of Christ's disciples contained in these words is a still bolder one than that expressed by the preceding metaphor, which we considered in the last sermon. 'Ye are the salt of the earth' implied superior moral purity and power to arrest corruption. 'Ye are the light of the world' implies superior spiritual illumination, and power to scatter ignorance.

That is not all the meaning of the words, but that is certainly in them. So then, our Lord here gives His solemn judgment that the world, without Him and those who have learned from Him, is in a state of darkness; and that His followers have that to impart which will bring certitude and clearness of knowledge, together with purity and joy and all the other blessed things which are 'the fruit of the light.'

That high claim is illustrated by a very homely metaphor. In every humble house from which His peasant-followers came, there would be a lamp — some earthen saucer with a little oil in it, in which a wick floated, a rude stand to put it upon, a meal-chest or a flour-bin, and a humble pallet on which to lie. These simple pieces of furniture are taken to point this solemn lesson. 'When you light your lamp you put it on the stand, do you not? You light it in order that it may give light; you do not put it under the meal-measure or the bed. So I have kindled you that you may shine, and put you where you are that you may give light.'

And the same thought, with a slightly different turn in the application, lies in that other metaphor, which is enclosed in the middle of this parable about the light: 'a city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.' Where they stood on the mountain, no doubt they could see some village perched upon a ridge for safety, with its white walls gleaming in the strong Syrian sunlight; a landmark for many a mile round. So says Christ: 'The City which I found, the true Jerusalem, like its prototype in the Psalm, is to be conspicuous for situation, that it may be the joy of the whole earth.'

I take all this somewhat long text now because all the parts of it hold so closely together, and converge upon the one solemn exhortation with which it closes, and which I desire to lay upon your hearts and consciences, 'Let your light so shine before men.' I make no pretensions to anything like an artificial arrangement of my remarks, but simply follow the words in the order in which they lie before us.

I. First, just a word about the great conception of a Christian man's office which is set forth in that metaphor, 'Ye are the light of the world.'

That expression is wide, 'generic,' as they say. Then in the unfolding of this little parable our Lord goes on to explain what kind of a light it is to which He would compare His people — the light of a lamp kindled, Now that is the first point that I wish to deal with. Christian men individually, and the Christian Church as a whole, shine by derived light. There is but One who is light in Himself. He who said, 'I am the light of the world, he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness,' was comparing Himself to the sunshine, whereas when He said to us, 'Ye are the light of the world; men do not light a lamp and put it under a bushel,' He was comparing us to the kindled light of the lamp, which had a beginning and will have an end.

Before, and independent of, His historical manifestation in the flesh, the Eternal Word of God, who from the beginning was the Life, was also the light of men; and all the light of reason and of conscience, all which guides and illumines, comes from that one source, the Everlasting Word, by whom all things came to be and consist. 'He was the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.' And further, the historic Christ, the Incarnate Word, is the source for men of all true revelation of God and themselves, and of the relations between them; the Incarnate Ideal of humanity, the Perfect Pattern of conduct, who alone sheds beams of certainty on the darkness of life, who has left a long trail of light as He has passed into the dim regions beyond the grave. In both these senses He is the light, and we gather our radiance from Him.

We shall be 'light' if we are 'in the Lord.' It is by union with Jesus Christ that we partake of His illumination. A sunbeam has no more power to shine if it be severed from the sun than a man has to give light in this dark world if He be parted from Jesus Christ. Cut the current and the electric light dies; slacken the engine and the electric arc becomes dim, quicken it and it burns bright. So the condition of my being light is my keeping unbroken my communication with Jesus Christ; and every variation in the extent to which I receive into my heart the influx of His power and of His love is correctly measured and represented by the greater or the lesser brilliancy of the light with which I reflect His radiance. 'Ye were some time darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord.' Keep near to Him, and a firm hold of His hand, and then you will be light.

And now I need not dwell for more than a moment or two upon what I have already said is included in this conception of the Christian man as being light. There are two sides to it: one is that all Christian people who have learned to know Jesus Christ and have been truly taught of Him, do possess a certitude and clearness of knowledge which make them the lights of the world. We advance no claims to any illumination as to other than moral or religious truth. We leave all the other fields uncontested. We bow humbly with confessed ignorance and with unfeigned gratitude and admiration before those who have laboured in them, as before our teachers, but if we are true to our Master, and true to the position in which He has placed us, we shall not be ashamed to say that we believe ourselves to know the truth, in so far as men can ever know it, about the all-important subject of God and man, and the bond between them.

To-day there is need, I think, that Christian men and women should not be reasoned or sophisticated or cowed out of their confidence that they have the light because they do know God. It is proclaimed as the ultimate word of modern thought that we stand in the presence of a power which certainly is, but of which we can know nothing except that it is altogether different from ourselves, and that it ever tempts us to believe that we can know it, and ever repels us into despair. Our answer is Yes! we could have told you that long ago, though not altogether in your sense; you have got hold of half a truth, and here is the whole of it : — 'No man hath seen God at any time, nor can see Him!' (a Gospel of despair, verified by the last words of modern thinkers), 'the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.'

Christian men and women, 'Ye are the light of the world.' Darkness in yourselves, ignorant about many things, ungifted with lofty talent, you have possession of the deepest truth; do not be ashamed to stand up and say, even in the presence of Mars' Hill, with all its Stoics and Epicureans: — 'Whom ye ignorantly' — alas! not 'worship' — 'Whom ye ignorantly speak of, Him declare we unto you.'

And then there is the other side, which I only name, moral purity. Light is the emblem of purity as well as the emblem of knowledge,

and if we are Christians we have within us, by virtue of our possession of an indwelling Christ, a power which teaches and enables us to practise a morality high above the theories and doings of the world. But upon this there is the less need to dwell, as it was involved in our consideration of the previous figure of the salt.

II. And now the next point that I would make is this, following the words before us — the certainty that if we are light we shall shine.

The nature and property of light is to radiate. It cannot choose but shine; and in like manner the little village perched upon a hill there, glittering and twinkling in the sunlight, cannot choose but be seen. So, says Christ, 'If you have Christian character in you, if you have Me in you, such is the nature of the Christian life that it will certainly manifest itself.' Let us dwell upon that for a moment or two. Take two thoughts: All earnest Christian conviction will demand expression; and all deep experience of the purifying power of Christ upon character will show itself in conduct.

All earnest conviction will demand expression. Everything that a man believes has a tendency to convert its believer into its apostle. That is not so in regard to common every-day truths, nor in regard even to truths of science, but it is so in regard to all moral truth. For example, if a man gets a vivid and intense conviction of the evils of intemperance and the blessings of abstinence, look what a fiery vehemence of propagandism is at once set to work. And so all round the horizon of moral truth which is intended to affect conduct; it is of such a sort that a man cannot get it into brain and heart without causing him before long to say — 'This thing has mastered me, and turned me into its slave; and I must speak according to my convictions.'

That experience works most mightily in regard to Christian truth, as the highest. What shall we say, then, of the condition of Christian men and women if they have not such an instinctive need of utterance? Do you ever feel this in your heart: — 'Thy word shut up in my bones was like a fire. I was weary of forbearing, and I could not stay'? Professing Christians, do you know anything of the longing to speak your deepest convictions, the feeling that the fire within you is burning through all envelopings, and will be out? What shall we say of the men that have it not? God forbid I should say there is no fire, but I do say that if the fountain never rises into the sunlight above the dead level of the pool, there can be very little pressure at the main; that if a man has not the longing to speak his religious convictions, those convictions must be very hesitating and very feeble; that if you never felt 'I must say to somebody I have found the Messiah,' you have not found Him in any very deep sense, and that if the light that is in you can be buried under a bushel, it is not much of a light after all, and needs a great deal of feeding and trimming before it can be what it ought to be.

On the other hand, all deep experience of the purifying power of Christ upon character will show itself in conduct. It is all very well for people to profess that they have received the forgiveness of sins and the inner sanctification of God's Spirit. If you have, let us see it, and let us see it in the commonest, pettiest affairs of daily life. The communication between the inmost experience and the outermost conduct is such as that if there be any real revolution deep down, it will manifest itself in the daily life. I make all allowance for the loss of power in transmission, for the loss of power in friction. I am glad to believe that you and I, and all our imperfect brethren, are a great deal better in heart than we ever manage to show ourselves to be in life. Thank God for the consolation that may come out of that thought — but notwithstanding I press on you my point that, making all such allowance, and setting up no impossible standard of absolute identity between duty and conduct in this present life, yet, on the whole, if we are Christian people with any deep central experience of the cleansing power and influence of Christ and His grace, we shall show it in life and in conduct. Or, to put it into the graphic and plain image of my text, If we are light we shall shine.

III. Again, and very briefly, this obligation of giving light is still further enforced by the thought that that was Christ's very purpose in all that He has done with us and for us.

The homely figure here implies that He has not kindled the lamp to put it under the bushel, but that His purpose in lighting it was that it might give light. God has made us partakers of His grace, and has given to us to be light in the Lord, for this among other purposes, that we should impart that light to others. No creature is so small that it has not the right to expect that its happiness and welfare shall be regarded by God as an end in His dealings with it; but no creature is so great that it has the right to expect that its happiness or well-being shall be regarded by God and itself as God's only end in His dealings with it. He gives us His grace, His pardon, His love, the quickening of His Spirit by our union with Jesus Christ; He gives us our knowledge of Him, and our likeness to Him — what for? 'For my own salvation, for my happiness and well-being,' you say. Certainly, blessed be His name for His love and goodness! But is that all His purpose? Paul did not think so when he said, 'God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness hath shined into our hearts that we might give to others the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' And Christ did not think so when He said, 'Men do not light a candle and put it under a bushel, but that it may give light to all that are in the house.' 'Heaven doth with us as we with torches do: not light them for themselves.' The purpose of God is that we may shine. The lamp is kindled not to illumine itself, but that it may 'give light to all that are in the house.'

Consider again, that whilst all these things are true there is yet a solemn possibility that men — even good men — may stifle and smother and shroud their light. You can do, and I am afraid a very large number of you do do, this; by two ways. You can bury the

light of a holy character under a whole mountain of inconsistencies. If one were to be fanciful, one might say that the bushel or meal-chest meant material well-being, and the bed, indolence and love of ease. I wonder how many of us Christian men and women have buried their light under the flour-bin and the bed, so interpreted? How many of us have drowned our consecration and devotion in foul waters of worldly lusts, and have let the love of earth's goods, of wealth and pleasure and creature love, come like a poisonous atmosphere round the lamp of our Christian character, making it burn dim and blue?

And we can bury the light of the Word under cowardly and sheepish and indifferent silence. I wonder how many of us have done that? Like blue-ribbon men that button their great-coats over their blue ribbons when they go into company where they are afraid to show them, there are many Christian people that are devout Christians at the Communion Table, but would be ashamed to say they were so in the miscellaneous company of a railway carriage or a table d'hote. There are professing Christians who have gone through life in their relationships to their fathers, sisters, wives, children, friends, kindred, their servants and dependants, and have never spoken a loving word for their Master. That is a sinful hiding of your light under the bushel and the bed.

IV. And so the last word, into which all this converges, is the plain duty: If you are light, shine!

'Let your light so shine before men,' says the text, 'that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.' In the next chapter our Lord says: 'Take heed that ye do not your alms before men to be seen of them. Thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are; for they love to pray standing in the synagogues that they may be seen of men.' What is the difference between the two sets of men and the two kinds of conduct? The motive makes the difference for one thing, and for another thing, 'Let your light so shine' does not mean 'take precautions that your goodness may come out into public,' but it means 'Shine!' You find the light, and the world will find the eyes, no fear of that! You do not need to seek 'to be seen of men,' but you do need to shine that men may see.

The lighthouse keeper takes no pains that the ships tossing away out at sea may behold the beam that shines from his lamp; all that he does is to feed it and tend it. And that is all that you and I have to do — tend the light, and do not, like cowards, cover it up. Modestly, but yet bravely, carry out your Christianity, and men will see it. Do not be as a dark lantern, burning with the slides down and illuminating nothing and nobody. Live your Christianity, and it will be beheld.

And remember, candles are not lit to be looked at. Candles are lit that something else may be seen by them. Men may see God through your words, through your conduct, who never would have beheld Him otherwise, because His beams are too bright for their dim eyes. And it is an awful thing to think that the world always — always — takes its conception of Christianity from the Church, and neither from the Bible nor from Christ; and that it is you and your like, you inconsistent Christians, you people that say your sins are forgiven and yet are doing the old sins day by day which you say are pardoned, you low-toned, unpraying, worldly Christian men, who have no elevation of character and no self-restraint of life and no purity of conduct above the men in your own profession and in your own circumstances all round you — it is you that are hindering the coming of Christ's Kingdom, it is you that are the standing disgraces of the Church, and the weaknesses and diseases of Christendom. I speak strongly, not half as strongly as the facts of the case would warrant; but I lay it upon all your consciences as professing Christian people to see to it that no longer your frivolities, or doubtful commercial practices, or low, unspiritual tone of life, your self-indulgence in household arrangements, and a dozen other things that I might name — that no longer do they mar the clearness of your testimony for your Master, and disturb with envious streaks of darkness the light that shines from His followers.

How effectual such a witness may be none who have not seen its power can suppose. Example does tell. A holy life curbs evil, ashamed to show itself in that pure presence. A good man or woman reveals the ugliness of evil by showing the beauty of holiness. More converts would be made by a Christ-like Church than by many sermons. Oh! if you professing Christians knew your power and would use it, if you would come closer to Christ, and catch more of the light from His face, you might walk among men like very angels, and at your bright presence darkness would flee away, ignorance would grow wise, impurity be abashed, and sorrow comforted.

Be not content, I pray you, till your own hearts are fully illumined by Christ, having no part dark — and then live as remembering that you have been made light that you may shine. 'Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.'