

12-2-1819

Thanksgiving. A Discourse Delivered at Hallowell, on the Day of the Annual Thanksgiving in Massachusetts

Eliphalet Gillet

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Recommended Citation

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PAMP 137

Vick

Thanksgiving.



Hiram Beecher
Farmington
(me.)

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED AT HALLOWELL,

ON THE DAY OF THE

ANNUAL THANKSGIVING

IN

MASSACHUSETTS,

Dec. 2, 1819.

BY ELIPHALET GILLET,
PASTOR OF THE FIRST CHURCH IN HALLOWELL.

HALLOWELL :
PRINTED BY E. GOODALE.
1819.

(151)

SERMON.

PSALM LXXV. 1.

"UNTO THEE, O GOD, DO WE GIVE THANKS, UNTO THEE DO WE GIVE THANKS; FOR THAT THY NAME IS NEAR, THY WONDROUS WORKS DECLARE."

THE distinctive character of every created being is seen in his works. "By their fruits ye shall know them." Their discriminating features are traced in their operations. It is equally true of the uncreated Jehovah. He challenges reverence, homage and obedience, from the displays he has made of his attributes, perfections, being and character. His works are a glass, in which we behold such wisdom and excellency, as to demand admiration and love. "Thou art good, and doest good." Paul declares that "the invisible things of God, even his eternal power and godhead, are clearly seen from the things that are made;" and that "he hath not left himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from Heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness." The psalmist is equally express; "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handy work; day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge." In every object that exists we see his creative power; in

the arrangement of things, his wise counsel ; and in passing events, the accomplishment of his purpose. It was he that "stretched out the north over the empty place, and hung the earth upon nothing ;" that encompassed it with a firmament studded with stars.— "That his name is near his wondrous works declare." He rules, not only "in the armies of heaven, but among the inhabitants of the earth." Hence it is said, in the sixth and seventh verses of the context ; "Promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south ; but God is the Judge ; he putteth down one, and setteth up another." The august frame of nature, so mysterious in its structure and yet so plain in its operations, so complicated in its parts and yet so nicely and harmoniously adjusted ; the regular return of seasons, and that order so observable throughout the immensity of the divine works ; as also the various dispensations of providence, connected with changes for which here on earth we find no adequate cause ; all these are an illustration of the majesty of Jehovah ; a declaration of his name ; are testimonials of his wisdom and knowledge, and tokens of his power and presence. Thus Israel on the banks of the Red Sea, contemplating their safety in the events that had arrested the progress of their foes, exclaimed ; "The Lord hath triumphed gloriously." Hence also, in viewing the displays of righteousness, the psalmist in the ninth verse of the context, breaks forth in strains of exultation ; "I will declare forever ; I will sing praises to the God of Jacob." The same spirit is manifest in the text ;

Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks, unto thee do we give thanks ; for that thy name is near, thy wondrous works declare.

To shew therefore, the grounds of our thanksgiving to God, we need only SKETCH THE CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF THE TIMES. These are traced out by the hand of the Almighty. They bear his impress. They discover to us the purpose, design, mind and will of God. We read herein the condescension, the care, the beneficence, and the bounty of "The Father of mercies," and our obligations to obedience, gratitude and praise.

The first thing that strikes one, is that profusion of common blessings which distinguishes the present time. "His paths drop fatness. He has fed thee with the finest of the wheat. The vallies also have been covered over with corn. He has crowned the year with his goodness." This goodness of the Lord is extensive, as it is abundant. It reaches to the four quarters of the world. The pensioners of his bounty in all places, have reason to say with the psalmist ; "Thou satisfiest our mouth with good things." Their "barns are filled with plenty, and their presses burst out with new wine."—But though this display of beneficence is so universal, yet no people, perhaps, more than ourselves, have reason of thanksgiving to that Being, who fixes the habitations of men, in assigning our lot in a "land which so constantly yields her increase," and whose harvests are sure.—I know many have thought otherwise. They have in multitudes, like the waves of the sea, flowed to the South.

and to the West. They looked to a land of better promise ; where the curse had never reached, that "man should get his bread by the sweat of his brow ;" where "fields were always whitening to the harvest." But these were vain hopes, and are abandoned. The tide of emigration is setting back again. Many now say, "The lines are fallen to us in pleasant places ; yea, we have a goodly heritage." How few among us, whose tables will not to-day, shew the bounty of God ! Few, did I say ? None at all ; not one ; unless they whom the Lord has appointed his stewards are found unfaithful ; unless the wealthy, and opulent forget to "be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate ;" unless, like the christians with whom St. James contends, they have found out a cheap way of charity ; "Be ye warmed, be ye clothed, be ye filled, and yet give them not those things that are needful to the body ;" unless these favorites of providence are fearful lest their treasures should be exhausted, by "giving to the poor, and lending to the Lord." And can such a thing be, in an age of beneficence ? and among believers too ? Believe what ? Not the Bible. That declares, that "there is that scattereth, and yet encreaseth ; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, and it tendeth to poverty." That declares that, "it is more blessed to give than to receive," and that "the liberal deviseth liberal things, and by liberal things he shall stand." But why should I press this ? You have already sent portions to the needy. Or, if you have not, you will not sit down to feast together before

the Lord, till you have manifested a practical regard to the solemn injunction of him, who "spreadeth thy table and filleth thy cup;"—*Thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother.*"*

The present age is also distinguished for its advancements in literature and science. Laudable zeal is manifested, and successful efforts made, in every department of knowledge. The lovers of science have pushed their researches beyond the limits of former ages. Progress has been made in philology, in chymical and biblical knowledge, and in attainments in general literature. It is an object to which the public mind turns with a favorable aspect. Some nations, within the present age, have, in this respect, almost entirely changed their character; emerging from comparative barbarism to a state of refinement in science. from lethargy and inactivity to zeal for the diffusion of knowledge. And our own country, though not yet first, in literary eminence, among the kingdoms of the world, is assuming a rank, to which heretofore she could not put in a claim. Her universities, and colleges, and minor institutions of science, are receiving an increase of public favor and public benefactions; and they, in their turn, are remunerating the public, by refining her enjoyments and throwing a lustre on her reputation. The College in our own vicinity, though in its infant state, yet as to the facilities for the attainment of knowledge it affords, would not suffer by a comparison with the older institutions of our land.

* Deut. xv. 7.

It has indeed been the peculiar object of a kind providence.—I know it has been afflicted. Twice has it been shrouded in sorrow ; twice bereaved of its respected Head, in the midst of life, labors and increasing celebrity.* And the latter instance so recent, that its apartments are still hung out with the symbols of mourning. He was indeed beloved ; and cut off in the midst of a career, useful as it was brilliant.—Peace to his dust ! Sacred be the sorrows of a mourning family ! And may the Lord, “ the repairer of breaches ;” in his wise providence, prefer some one to the important station, who, in virtues, in talents, and in zeal for the promotion of science and of the public good, shall resemble his worthy predecessors.

But, though I have adverted to the advancement of science, in its higher departments, yet I have more especial reference to the *general diffusion* of knowledge, as a marked feature of the present time. The public attention is directed, with interest and with effort, to the communication of knowledge to those, whose poverty or whose condition has hitherto placed it beyond their reach. The children of the indigent are remembered, and the poor African, whose birthright has been ignorance, time immemorial. It is this species of information, knowledge widely and universally communicated respecting the common transactions and ever-occurring incidents of human life, upon which, in a peculiar manner, depend the virtue, the order, and the tranquillity of a people. “ The heart of the rash must understand knowledge, and the tongue of the

* Rev. JOSEPH M'KEEN, D. D. *Æt.* 49, and Rev. JESSE APPLETON, D. D. 47.

stammerer speak plainly." It augurs well to the permanence and stability of a state, when knowledge becomes, like air and water, the common privilege of a community. Let the devotee celebrate ignorance, as the mother of devotion; let the lordly nabob sing hosannas to it, as the charter by which he holds his slaves; let the wily politician foster it, as suited to his schemes of aggrandizement and usurpation: I would still say with Solomon, "For the soul to be without knowledge it is not good."

It is an easy transition from the science or literature of a nation, to its political state, its civil administration. Indeed, they are intimately connected. The one takes its cue from the other. "Liberty with order," the quiet enjoyment of civil rights, that freedom which is the felicity and ornament of a people, is the effect only of an enlightened policy. There may be, where comparative ignorance prevails, sufficient physical strength and sometimes successfully directed, to burst the bands of tyranny and throw off the restraints of a relentless power; it however, seldom issues in a rational self-government, but in "confusion and every evil work." But when the light of science is diffused universally, we may look, not only for the progress of rational liberty, but for the prevalence of a milder and more pacific spirit.

We see a ground of gratitude, in that profound and universal peace, that has succeeded the "shaking of the nations," the "turning of the world upside down." In the whole horizon, there is scarce a "speck of war." The nations, as if wearied with mutual slaughter, have sought an universal repose. In this, our own nation especially participates. There is none to disturb, or to make afraid, to hurt or destroy, throughout all our

borders. It is an important era to this section of our country, especially, as taking a stand among the Independent States of the Union. The Constitution, the palladium of their rights, has been already formed and circulated, and is soon to be submitted to the consideration of the people, in their primary assemblies. As a whole, I should pronounce it good. If it were submitted to me, I might attempt to amend it; should certainly, in some respects, alter it; and so would probably every one of you, my hearers, each in his own way. But, if it does not equal our wishes, it is, at least, as good as our hopes, and better than our fears. There will be different opinions, and different opinions among those who equally wish well to the general good, how far civil authority should extend its influence to the system of public devotion. As it respects real, evangelical, experimental piety, it may be admitted on all hands, that it can live without the aid of government. It can live against the force of government; under the oppressive arm of human authority. It has done it. It lived, and grew, and flourished, under ten successive persecutions of the Roman dominion; a dominion which, for its overwhelming power, the Holy Ghost has been pleased to shadow forth under the image of a "beast dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly."*—But as to the order of society, the general promotion of morals, the sacredness of the Sabbath, the outworks of christianity; they may need protection from the shade of human laws. And a government may find its account in encouraging, (in a very general way to be sure,) public worship, and christian morality, for the same reasons, that it encourages institutions of

* Daniel vii. 7.

science, of humanity and charity ; that is, for the present promotion of the general welfare.—But what is wanting in a Constitution may be supplied in the enactment of particular laws from time to time, as the exigencies of a people, or the public sentiment may require. Or, if not in the general laws of a State, the defect may be remedied, in a degree, (as in some of the middle States,) by the energy of particular corporations within their own limits. It is interesting, in scenes of such a nature, that there is a spirit of condescension, and union, and harmony. And I would consider it as a matter of devout thanksgiving to Almighty God, that a measure of such moment, as forming a Constitution for a new and rising State ; a measure, not only affecting at present a widely extended population, but forming the basis of their future operations, involving the interests of posterity ; that a measure of such vital influence and importance should, through a kind providence, have been delayed, until the fire of party contention had gone out, and its ashes scattered to the four winds.

I shall relieve your attention, my hearers, after considering our subject in one other point of view, and that is, in its bearings upon religion. But some may say ; We will have nothing to do with religion. We will be thankful for the mercies of heaven, and use them as best suits our passions, and inclinations, and desires. God never gave us mercies without meaning we should enjoy them.—Who could more fully illustrate this principle, or more effectually throw off all moral restraint, than Dives ? Yet his success was only temporary. He “fared sumptuously” and lived thoughtlessly “every day.” But how few were those days of riot, and dissipation, and infidelity ! How

soon "he lift up his eyes in hell, being in torments!" How soon he found that the hand of his God had fixed an impassable gulf between him, and the abodes of blessedness! They may say indeed; We will have nothing to do with religion. But religion will have something to do with them. They cannot, by denying its authority, bar its claims. They cannot, by violating its laws, destroy its power. It will still speak out its thunders. "If they were tygers, they might devour their prey, and slumber. But conscience wakes. The remembrance of crime, murders sleep."* Does not this speak the very language of scripture? "We must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ." Does not this shew, that religion has a hold upon man, as a moral, accountable being? Else why this "fearful looking for of judgment, and of fiery indignation that shall consume the adversaries?"—And why cast off religion? Its restraints are wholesome restraints. By moderating the passions, it purifies and perpetuates enjoyment. Religion surpasses all other objects, as the orb of day outshines the star of the morning, which disappears at his approach. We ought indeed to be thankful for the light of the stars; but that is mere twinkling, compared with the full blaze of the noon-tide sun.

I have said that religion surpasses every other object. I might have said more; that without it the sum of all other treasures is but a fading inheritance. It is not to be accounted of. This is the "one thing needful." You might live in the profusion of a Nero, who could shoe his horse with gold; you might have the power of a Cæsar, at whose approach whole nations trembled, and at whose nod senates bowed; you might extend

* Chateaubriand.

your fame with an Alexander, whose conquests were limited only by the bounds of the world ; and yet without this, you would be "poor, and wretched, and miserable, and blind, and naked." Besides, what else, but religion in its life and power, is of sufficient authority to subject man to his God ? Will you by lectures of philosophy and descriptions of the beauty of virtue, or by all human means, succeed in arresting the progress of vice and silencing the mutiny of human passions ? Yes ;—when Xerxes succeeds in curbing the impetuosity of the waves, by casting iron fetters into the sea. But though human means, and human wisdom, and human power all fail ; "the Spirit of the Lord is not straitened." That can bow the stoutest heart. When one is converted, it is the effect of a divine religion. It is the Lord's doing. And we may say of it, with as much truth, as in view of "his wonders in the field of Zoan ;" "This is the finger of God."*

The literary virtuoso might say ; "Iōthen Athēnas ;" Let us go to Athens. But the humble disciple of Jesus would say ; Iōthen "ton topon Kraniou ;"* Let us go to Calvary. The "mistress of the arts," the "eye of Greece," the "school of the world," would shew you her academies, her lycæums, her porticoes, her sepulchres, her pictures and poems, and domes and temples, the inimitable productions of the historian and poet, and painter and statuary, every thing that could amuse the fancy, delight the imagination, and charm the mind.—And what would you see at Mount Zion ?—THE CROSS BY WHICH A GUILTY WORLD WAS REDEEMED.—You would see Jesus

* Psalm lxxviii, 43, & Exod. viii, 19.

† John xix, 17. Gr.

“witnessing a good confession before Pontius Pilate;”
 “To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the TRUTH.” You would see the perfection of patience and forbearance, and mercy; see him calmly submitting to the scoffs of the people, and the outrage of a rude soldiery; see the nails that suspended him upon the cross and the spear entering his side. You would hear his intercessory prayer. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do; and see him “bow his head and give up the ghost.” You would perceive “the rocks rend, the earth quake,” and darkness shroud the world for the space of three hours. —There may be nothing here to amuse or charm but it bows the heart, subdues the soul. Rightly viewing such a scene, could you go away and plunge again into the vanities, and pleasures and vices of life? Oh, no; it would be sharpening again the spear, that pierced his side; it would be driving again the nails that fastened his hands and his feet; it would be “crucifying Christ afresh and putting him to open shame.” “He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them and rose again.” “The love of Christ constraineth us.” “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.”

And this is the religion that God is now extending over the earth; that he is reviving and spreading, and establishing, by following the preaching of the Gospel, “with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven.” It is the religion deep, sincere, experi-

mental, evangelical and practical; learned at the foot of the cross. It is the religion of Jesus. It is marching to universal triumph. And this is the age, which in a peculiar manner, shews the earnestness, the first fruits of a Saviour's reign.—What is effected in the islands of the South Sea is an abundant reward of a twenty years labor; their idols sent to Europe, as a memento of their former superstitions, and their present change. They who dwelt “in the habitations of cruelty,” and bowed down to stocks and stones, now worship Jesus and “sanctify his Sabbaths.” I might point you to the dark parts of Africa, where the gospel light begins to shine; to Bombay, Ceylon, or Birmah, in India, or to the tribes inhabiting the skirts of our own territory. But why do I speak of a single territory? or point you to an individual place? This religion is traversing the earth. And what multitudes of auxiliaries has it leagued to its assistance! Bible Societies—Education Societies—Missionary Societies—Theological Societies—the various and salutary effects of which, if I should attempt to present in detail, instead of preaching a sermon, I should be making a volume.

Among these various Institutions, all which are supported by a liberality peculiar to the present age, none perhaps more directly tend to fulfil the command; “Go preach the gospel to every creature;” than Theological Seminaries designed to qualify young men for the service of Christ, for laborers in the vineyard of the Lord.

A single Institution* of this kind, in our own Commonwealth, (and there are many of a kindred nature, in

* Divinity College, at Andover.

our country, and in foreign lands,) but, in a single Institution of this kind, in our own Commonwealth, there are now more than an hundred students; three fourths of whom are supported by the hand of charity. The truth of the declaration of Jehovah was never more practically manifested; "THE SILVER AND THE GOLD ARE MINE."

This religion is our religion, and in many souls it has shewn its transforming power. We have the promise, that it shall prevail. "He shall reign until he hath put all enemies under his feet." Vice indeed abounds, follies and amusements call off the mind from better things. But, instead of sitting down discouraged, I would double my efforts to withstand these evils. While looking at the features of the age and the promise of my God, instead of desponding, I would say in the emphatic language of St. Paul, "I do rejoice, yea and will rejoice."

May all the various blessings we have enumerated, and in which we so richly share, and which are the characteristic features of the times, hasten the complete fulfilment of the prediction; "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose." And may this District, so extensive in territory, so fruitful in its soil, so rapidly increasing in numbers, so favored with the means of knowledge, and so soon to assume the attitude of an Independent State; conduct her affairs with such discretion and wisdom, as to be an abode of righteousness; that "her walls may be called salvation and her gates praise;" and that we may invoke the benediction of heaven, with hopes of audience and acceptance; "THE LORD BLESS THEE, O HABITATION OF JUSTICE, AND MOUNTAIN OF HOLINESS!"—*AMEN.*