

A PASTORAL RETROSPECT.

FAREWELL SERMON

PREACHED IN

MAYBOLE OLD CHURCH

BY

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ON

SUNDAY, 26TH SEPTEMBER, 1943.

PRINTED BY REQUEST.

Luke xvii. 10.

"When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants, we have done that which was our duty to do."

Within the next few days, all being well, a new minister will have taken my place here. He will come with my best wishes, and with my earnest prayers that his ministry may be happy, effective, and fruitful. I look to you to give him every encouragement and backing, that he may carry out his plans and ideas in an atmosphere of goodwill and hearty co-operation. No doubt some of his methods may differ from mine, as he comes a long generation after me in age and outlook. I trust you may readily adjust yourselves to whatever new conditions may arise, and that your new pastor may be as happy among you as I have been. Today, then, is my last Sunday as active minister here. My thoughts go back to my first, the Sunday after I was ordained, the 26th January, 1902. There are three texts of Scripture which have always been associated in my mind with that occasion.

(a) I was introduced at the morning service by the Rev. Dr Strong of Hillhead, whose assistant I had been. He preached from II. Cor. x, 4—"The weapons of our warfare are not carnal." I take that to mean that one cannot have too high an ideal of the Christian ministry, and of the Divine nature and aims of Christ's Church. The Church's methods of work must be definitely spiritual. There must be no lowering of the flag, no cheapening or sensationalising of Gospel truth, no striving after popularity and applause for their own sakes, no pandering to worldly aims, or to the insatiable thirst for entertainment, no vulgarising of the holy vessels of the Lord. That was a true counsel to give to any young minister. I have tried during these forty-one years to follow it.

(b) When I came here the Sunday School met, not before the morning service, but after it. Well, when I went over to the School that day, another lesson was waiting for me. The memory verse for the scholars on that Sunday happened to be I. Kings, xx., 11.—"Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off." How necessary that was for one to remember at the outset of one's work in life! Not to be over-confident or rash or presumptuous, but to study

modesty, humility, tactfulness, caution, to be amenable to advice, and to be ready to admit and apologise for mistakes, if these should be made. The verse might have been chosen just for my own special benefit, I thought at the time. I took care to store it up in my memory. It was not, I honestly believe, in any boastful mood I girded on my harness here and began my task. And now that I am putting it off, handing in my weapons at the armoury, I am not disposed to be any more self-complacent at the close than I was at the start. Rather, looking back on the past, one would lay to heart the words from St. Luke's Gospel, "When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unprofitable servants, we have done that which was our duty to do.' How much that has been done might have been done better! How many important things have been left undone altogether! How much more widely open one's eyes might have been to discern opportunities of spiritual usefulness and influence! What chances of leading souls to Christ may have been let slip! No, the day for taking off the harness is no time for self-congratulation, but the very reverse. And in any case, the mere performance of one's duty is no reason for boasting. Drawing the line at 'duty' is a poor habit. In the world of moral geography there are no North or South Poles, no ultimate limits of any sort. For one can never do nearly enough for God. One can never discharge a thousandth part of the debt that is owed to Christ.

(c) At the evening service of my first Sunday here I preached myself. The text was from Ezekiel xlvii., 9—"Everything shall live whither the river cometh." I have never set eyes on that sermon since it was delivered that evening, though I suppose it must still be somewhere among my papers. I have no recollection whatever of the line taken in expounding the text. But the verse has a message for us still, whatever I may have said or left unsaid forty years ago. "Everything shall live whither the river cometh." What river? Surely the river of the water of life, the river of salvation, the flood-tide of the grace of God. The Gospel of Christ—for all mankind that is the one source and supply of vigour, health, life itself. Apart from that, and its perpetual renewal, the world has no future but decrepitude, misery, ruin. Where Christ comes, there is hope for men. Where His will is honoured, there is brotherhood and peace. The more fully His Spirit flows into men's hearts, the more

His Church is held in honour, the higher His Cross is exalted and the more deeply His saving power is experienced—the more does earth grow to resemble heaven. Is that not as true to-day as ever? Does not its truth shine out all the more clearly against the blackness and despair of the years through which the world is presently passing? The great need is that men should open their souls to Christ.

A holy Church: a humble ministry: a healing message—so much for my first Sunday in this pulpit. Now we have come to my last as sole pastor here. Forty-one and a half years are a big slice out of any man's life. As I look back over them, what changes stand out against the landscape of time! First, in world affairs. When I came here the conflict in S. Africa was just nearing its close. In 1914 came the first Great War: in 1939 the present titanic struggle commenced. Of these three wars during my ministry all, but, of course, especially the last two, have dug deep beneath the foundations of the structure of social life, national and international. We are still too close to these stupendous happenings to be able to gauge how profoundly they have changed the whole face of civilisation and revolutionised men's ideas concerning all things in heaven and earth. But the world of to-day is quite a different place from that of the comparatively naive nineteenth century, and the world of to-morrow will be stranger still. It is impossible to conceive of a more difficult age in which to be a minister than the present, with everything on the face of creation (and down towards the heart of it) in a state of flux, suspense, unsettlement. These are testing times for everything connected with religious institutions.

Second, in local affairs. Here I am on ground familiar to you all. At the start of my ministry Maybole was a much busier town than it is now. Then five shoe factories were working (often with long spells of overtime) as well as two implement works. Trade was humming: there were no empty shops on the streets. It was before the big emigrations to Canada about 1906. You know what a shrinkage there has been in all this, and how the town population has diminished. On the other hand, housing conditions, both in the burgh and among the cot-people have vastly improved since these early days; infant mortality and preventable disease have been greatly reduced. And owing to the lessening of the number of licensed premises and the high taxation on liquor, one sees far less drunkenness than used

to be prevalent. That is all to the good, though one regrets some indications of a falling back in this last matter that have asserted themselves during the course of the war. On the whole, we may say that Maybole, if its trade has declined somewhat, is a cleaner, healthier, more sober, more wholesome town to live in that it was a generation ago.

But, of course, what most concerns us here is the changes in Church Life that have come about during that period. I speak only of our own congregation, whose interests have lain on my heart all through these long years. Its personnel has been very largely replaced, by the growing up of young folks to manhood and womanhood, and by the advent of newcomers. Of the 450 persons who signed the call to me in 1902 the names of only 33 are to be found on the roll to-day. The kirk session has been emptied and refilled over and over again. No one of the elders who were here when I was ordained is now alive. The church workers have changed almost as completely. In the Sunday School only one lady teacher still faithfully carries on the work she began almost half a century ago: in the choir one treble voice may still be heard that joined in the music of my first service. In the Work Party, which has always been the nerve and pulse of our congregational activity and liberality, there are still some who were present when I was introduced to it after my ordination. Many in all these useful organisations (as well as choir members and collectors and paid officials) have fallen on sleep and won the reward of their unselfish labours. I trust that in the years ahead there will be no lack of volunteers to give whatever help the minister may call for. For my own part, I have never failed to find in the congregation a firm core of loyalty—reliable people, regular in worship, liberal in giving, always willing to help.

Next, our buildings. In 1902 the Church Hall was enlarged, and the porch was added. The fabric of the church itself, as you know, has undergone a complete renovation. That was some thirteen years ago. It was a very big effort indeed. I may say that it put some years on my own age, and that I have never been just quite the same man since. I would wish to acknowledge how greatly I was indebted at that time to the church treasurer, who was unfailingly diligent and infinitely helpful. However, the new minister when he comes, will find a

church to preach in very different from the one I fell heir to. And thanks to the wisdom of the kirk session in investing and husbanding their resources, as well as to the energy of our present session clerk, he will have a manse to live in that is modern, convenient to work, and pleasantly situated.

The population of the town is smaller than it used to be, but our congregational membership has not greatly fallen during my time. I wish I could say the same about church attendance. That is not nearly so good as it used to be. I blame the first great war very largely for this. Then a slackening took place which we have never been able to remedy. I earnestly trust that the second great war may not carry this bad trend still farther. Of course, the decline in church-going is not confined to Maybole, but that is no excuse for Maybole. I calculate that there are some hundreds of our members, who have no valid reason for not coming to church, but who are never present except at communion—and that not always. "Sacramentarians," I sometimes call them. They do not represent the most enlightened type of Churchmanship. Forty years ago there were far fewer of these. I wonder how they are to be brought to a sense of their Christian duty—and privilege. The problem has quite baffled me. Christian liberality, however, is much better today than it used to be. I could prove this from our old reports if necessary, but you will take my word for it. Still, we have as yet nothing to boast of in this respect. But it is a good thing that we are slowly moving in the right direction here. As I have told you before, from the pulpit and elsewhere, in the future the demands on your generosity will be heavier than they have been. I trust that whatever sums have to be raised for congregational needs may not lessen our liberality towards the wider objects of the church—the Missions and other schemes.

In my time I have had the assistance of two church officers, both most trustworthy and respected men. They, with the help of their households, have at all times kept our church and hall in scrupulous condition. There have been seven organists since the century began.

I am glad to be able to say that my ministry has been a very peaceful one. From time to time wars have raged in the ends of the earth, but here our church life has gone on quietly and without strife. In the kirk session, I have no recollection of any matter ever being pressed to a vote. We have always

just talked round any difficult question before us, until we came to a finding in which all the elders could acquiesce. And I really think that as a congregation we have tried to exemplify the ideal of a harmonious Christian family and household. It is a great comfort to be able to testify to a record like that.

And now the time has come for me to put off the harness which I girded on forty-one and a half years ago. I had had hoped to be able to remain in office at least until the end of the war, but matters were ordered otherwise. In many ways I shall be glad to be relieved of the burden of duty. I would have liked to make another round of visitation before going away. That, however, was quite out of the question, and you will all take my good-bye—or at least my au revoir—to-day.

My sister and I would acknowledge the constant and repeated kindnesses you have shown us, and we shall cherish many warm friendships and the sacred memories of old acquaintances, living and dead. Wherever we go, this church and parish will always be much in our thoughts.

Let me close my active ministry, then, by repeating the words with which I began it. "Everything shall live whither the river cometh." Take Christ into your life, refresh your soul constantly with His grace, and all must be well with you. Love His Church; worship in it, work for it, make your life and example an honour to it. Encourage your new minister when he comes among you. Help to direct the current of the river of God into lands and homes and souls that are thirsty and parched and fruitless. On the battlefield anyone who can give a cup of cold water to a wounded man is often welcomed as an angel from heaven. Well, the Church is God's water-carrier in the hard-fought conflict against sin and sorrow. None can take her place as His messenger of comfort and strength. Her Sacraments are the soul's most precious cordials and nourishment. She has life to offer in Christ's name; see that you make it your own.

O sweeter than the marriage feast!
'Tis sweeter far to me
To walk together to the kirk
In a goodly company—
To walk together to the kirk,
And all together pray,
While each to the great Father bends,
Old men, and babes, and loving friends,
And youths and maidens gay.
Good-bye, and God bless you all!