

THE RESPONSIBILITY ATTACHING TO  
NATIONAL CHARACTER.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT ST. JAMES' CATHEDRAL,

TORONTO,

ON SUNDAY, APRIL 22, 1866;

BEFORE THE PRESIDENT AND MEMBERS

OF

*The St. George's Society of Toronto.*

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PUBLISHED FOR THE SOCIETY.

TORONTO :

HENRY ROWSELL, KING STREET.

1866.





## S E R M O N .



“Our conversation is in Heaven.”—PHILIPPIANS, iii, 20.

THE Apostle S. Paul, among other excellent gifts whereby he was especially qualified for the discharge of his high office, seems to have possessed a generous and genial aptitude for meeting those to whom he addressed himself on their own ground, by appealing to latent sympathies, and making familiar and endeared associations the vehicle of new and ennobling thoughts. It is not improbable that one of the words of the text furnishes an instance of this skilful power of adaptation—the word which is translated “conversation.” It occurs no where else in the New Testament, and it would seem that it should rather be rendered either by the word “citizenship” or “country.” If either of these renderings be adopted, we may readily conceive that, by the use of the term, the Apostle designed to appeal to a sentiment cherished, as he well knew, in the hearts of many of those to whom he was writing, or, at all events, to refer to a matter of fact with which they were familiar.

The city of Philippi, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, was a "colony"—a colony of Rome. The original settlers had brought with them the proud name of Roman citizens—they had transmitted it to their descendants, and these descendants were living in a foreign land, surrounded by institutions and customs, which from day to day reminded them of their illustrious birthright.

When the Apostle, therefore, himself a citizen of Rome, speaks of our "citizenship" or of "our country," to those who shared with him this dearest of all civil privileges, or even to those who looked with longing gaze upon an immunity—a dignity—which they did not themselves enjoy, would he not teach them, in a most impressive manner, to measure the heavenly against the earthly name, and to account more truly of the dignity of the spiritual birthright, by thus bringing it into juxtaposition with that temporal distinction, which they so greatly coveted or so ardently cherished?

And, if we would lead men to value aright future and spiritual blessing, we must not seek to effect this end by merely disparaging and contemning what God has given us for the life that now is. His gifts are ever good in themselves; as His gifts they are His servants—His ministers to us—setting forth His praise, and conveying

His fatherly blessing : it is only when man presumes to appropriate them without one thought of the Giver—abuses, instead of using, them—and sets them up as objects of an idolatrous regard, it is only then that they become occasions of dishonour to the Almighty and of peril to the souls of men.

And one of these gifts—at least to man in his fallen estate—is the special tie of country and of race. Every hope which we are taught to entertain for the great hereafter is interpreted to us in language borrowed from the objects of our earthly affections : we are taught to look for a Father's *house*, in which are “many mansions,” or abiding-places ; for “a *city* that hath foundations ;” for “a *kingdom* that cannot be moved :” and the Apostle, when he speaks of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as of Him, “of whom every family in heaven and earth is named,” teaches us most emphatically by what means God would draw His creatures to His love and fear : not, as the tyranny and jealousy of man would often seek to bind others to his service, by excluding them from all other objects of interest or of attachment ; but, with all the royal munificence of Him, who is the source and author of every good, by constituting, both in heaven and upon earth, in their due order, families bound together under their respective

heads ; so that, as our understandings are developed, and our hearts become more and more enlarged, we may pass out of the narrow circle, within which we become primarily conscious of parental care and susceptible of filial love, to the appreciation of those wider bonds, whether civil or spiritual, which have been provided to cement the fellowship of man ; and may ultimately learn to recognize, not only in the beneficent order which God has established, both in the world and in the Church—in the rule of the civil magistrate and in the care of the ecclesiastical superior,—but also in the “ thrones and dominions—the principalities and powers” of heaven—so many steps, by which we may ascend to a less unworthy conception of the supreme fatherhood of God—of the treasures of love and wisdom and power which are stored up in that Great Parent both of angels and of men, from whom alone is derived all fatherly tenderness and care—all capacity to guide, to defend, to bless, His mighty Spirit enabling what were otherwise but powerless and lifeless names, to become living and potent types of His own ineffable loving-kindness.

In the dealings of the Almighty with fallen man, it is not often that we are called upon to recognize indications of wrath unmixed with mercy : we may indeed doubt whether *any* such

indication presents itself in the history of our race. The awful judgment of the flood was, no doubt, designed to be, for the future generations of mankind, a dispensation of grace: the overthrow of the cities of the plain we may well believe to have been not only a fiery judgment which destroyed the guilty, but also a fiery remedy which preserved the moral life of multitudes, on whom their evil example would have wrought with deadly effect: and if, in these extreme instances, we may perceive that the correction was administered, at least in respect of our race at large, not only "in anger," but "with judgment," much more may we discern a gracious and beneficent purpose underlying less afflictive dispensations, which were, nevertheless, visitations of human sin—rebukes of the pride and stubbornness of man.

Of such dispensations the dispersion at Babel is a signal instance. It was, indeed, a punitive infliction, yet we cannot doubt that it was also a corrective and remedial discipline, designed to work out signal benefits for our race—benefits which, as we have good reason to believe, have been largely realized in ages past, and are still in course of progressive realization. The "one language" and the "one speech" was no longer, to degenerate man, a powerful instrument of advancement in wholesome knowledge and in the apprehension of



truth ; it had become rather a formidable engine, whereby the growth of evil might be accelerated and an uniform depravity of character developed : and so God, by scattering mankind abroad on the face of the whole earth, not only punished them but saved them ; not only extinguished the vain projects of their ambition, but preserved them from a corruption akin to that which had provoked the judgment of the flood. He sent the families of the earth apart, to nurse in their seclusion those distinctive excellences, moral or intellectual, which they had derived from their immediate forefathers, or which should be cherished within them by their examples, or developed by their several modes of life, or by the characteristics of the different habitations “ the bounds ” of which God had now “ set ” for them. We cannot doubt the potent influences of climate—of occupation—of transmitted qualities, when men were thus divided ; while the total estrangement which, in many cases, continued for very long periods between different races, gave full opportunity for the consolidation of that distinctive national character, which the history both of the past and of the present places before us as an indubitable fact.

We cannot expect, indeed, to read with any clearness the vast and profound purposes of the Almighty in His providential government of the

world ; but we may at least perceive that the great nations of antiquity, as they passed across the stage of time, lived and acted for some end higher than any thoughts of their own ; while, in some instances, we may very plainly trace how they contributed, though most unwittingly, their share to the bringing in of “ the dispensation of the fullness of the times.”

One of our most illustrious British statesmen\* not long since traced, with great power and with signal eloquence, the place and office of the Greek people in the history of the world ; and no thoughtful man can reflect on the fact that the inspired writings of the New Covenant have been delivered to us, by the Apostles of our Lord, in the Greek language, without feeling the conviction that, while “ the isles ” were waiting in darkness for the coming of the great Deliverer, God was—by means of the excellent natural gifts wherewith he had endowed the sons of Greece—perfecting a human vehicle for the heaven-taught Gospel of His Son, wherein it might be transmitted to the latest generations, teaching from day to day new lessons, disclosing evermore to humble and faithful hearts new tokens of “ the manifold wisdom of God.”

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\* The Right Honorable W. E. Gladstone, in his speech on resigning the office of Lord Rector of the University of Edinburgh.

And, again, independently of the vast work which the Roman republic and empire were permitted to achieve, in uniting the different peoples of Europe by the bond of a common political organization, or in opening up, as the pioneers of Christianity, those great lines of communication by which its heralds should advance, making "the crooked straight," and "the rough ways smooth," and thus preparing, with far other thoughts, an highway for the Prince of Peace ; we cannot doubt that the peculiar characteristics of the Roman people were designed by the Almighty to further his gracious purposes. We may read, in the early history of the Church, that the strong, and as some would say, the rude contrast, which the west presented to the east, was not without its use ; that stern common sense and a somewhat imperious contempt for dialectic subtleties—accompanied by a resolute adherence to truths once for all delivered—cut the Gordian knot of many a controversy, and saved the truth from suffering through the unrestrained speculations whether of its friends or of its enemies.

And surely, brethren, if we look to times more recent, we have good cause to believe that God has had His gracious purposes in moulding, by His providence, the national character of the race to which we belong. Nor that the less, if our past

history tells us how many elements were, one after another, introduced into our national life ; for at length the process was completed and a thorough fusion took place, and our insular position, as well as the hostile relations which were, almost without interruption, maintained towards the neighboring powers of the continent of Europe, contributed to stamp upon the English people a distinctive character, marked no doubt by many foibles and defects, yet ennobled—thank God—by many a priceless virtue.

If then we have just reason to believe that God, in His good providence, so dealt with our ancestors as to cherish and develope within them these excellences of character, ought we not to look upon them as by far the most sacred—the most precious—portion of the birthright which we so highly esteem.

If we believe that our citizenship—our country—is in heaven, if we seriously consider how very soon all merely earthly distinctions must pass away forever—how nothing which now belongs to us can be borne hence, save that which, through God's grace, has been made a part of our new spiritual being, then shall we see that we must, before God, rejoice in the name which we inherit from our forefathers, not for any transient glories by which it may be encompassed, but for that en-

during honour which pertains, whether to individuals or to communities, who honour God—who love Him and keep His commandments.

Let us ask ourselves, then, to what points of the national character we may turn, as Christian men in the presence of God, with devout joy and thankfulness; what points of the national character we should pray God to preserve to us and to our children; while we strive, with all our might, that no difficulties presented by altered circumstances—no contagion of ill example around us—may ever tempt us to forego our love of that which was once so dear to us at home. It is impossible, within the limits of this discourse, to enter fully upon this wide and most interesting subject. I will mention two points only, in respect of which we must all feel how deeply our welfare, whether as individuals or as a community, is involved in maintaining the moral—or rather the religious—traditions of our ancestors.

First, then, we cannot doubt how blessed an instruction God gave to man, when He uttered from Mount Sinai “the first commandment with promise”; and we have ample proof, both from sacred and from profane history, that the Almighty did then but solemnly sanction a law which man had long before been taught to regard with the deepest reverence. The fifth commandment is not only

the first of the second table, it seems to constitute a bond between the two tables—a hedge to the laws of the first table. It guards the duty which we owe to God, by enforcing that reverence for human superiors, in rendering which we can alone learn to cherish any fitting reverence for the great Father of our spirits.

I trust, then, that we may claim reverence for parental authority—that reverence which is the only adequate safeguard of true filial love—as a characteristic of the English people. Time was, at all events, when the homes of England were graced and blessed by this reverence, and our effort should be that, on these distant shores, that old domestic virtue may be re-produced in all its power and freshness. The breadth of that Divine command, which asserts for parents their due honour, extends to every other relation of superiority; the reverent and obedient child carries forth with him into the world the germ of all submission to authority—of a free and generous recognition of every claim, which age or station or endowment may have upon him; and, in thus gracefully and nobly rendering their due to all others, he lays the foundation of a reverence for himself—of a modest apprehension of violating the dignity of his own nature—which is the very opposite of shallow self-esteem and self-conceit, and which can never find

place in any heart save that which has learned, by Divine grace, to fear God and to honour all men. There is a group of words, which St. Paul delights to use, for which it is impossible to find any adequate English equivalents, but which express exactly that grace of the Christian character, which is the result of a fine moral perception of that which is due both to others and to ourselves. *Σεμνός* and *σεμνότης*, which are in heathen writers equivocal terms, are, in the writings of St. Paul, re-established in their proper honour, expressing, as they do, a decency—a dignity—of external conduct, a moral beauty of deportment, which can never be exhibited save by one who is keenly conscious of the claims which others have upon him, and studiously careful never to violate those claims; and who is, at the same time, very sensitive of what he owes to himself—very rigid in exacting from himself his own personal obligations. On such a man we look both with love and with awe; how unlike is he to the pushing man of the world—how very unlike the many who are moulded merely by the accidents of the time. An ignorant or contemptuous neglect of that which is due to others, is sure to involve, as its ultimate consequence, a frightful loss of all self-reverence—of all sense of the dignity of that wondrous being with which God has endowed us.

But there is another characteristic of the English race for which we may venture to be thankful before God ; I mean, their truthfulness. There are nations, I believe, amongst whom it is accounted the grossest possible insult to question a man's *intelligence* ; a doubt of his *veracity* would, in comparison of this, be regarded but as a trifle. No deeper wound can be inflicted on an Englishman than the denial of his truthfulness and honour. Long may it be so. Woe to us if it ever shall be otherwise. Is there any attribute of the Almighty Himself which is more repeatedly—more emphatically—declared in Holy Scripture than this ? “A God of truth, and without iniquity, just and right is He.” Let us not forget that there are influences at work around us, which are prejudicial to the maintenance of this virtue. The fusion of the different classes of society is dangerous to it. The undue admiration of address and adroitness in the transaction of business is dangerous to it. We have sad proof on every side that, in the mixed society of this continent, it is a virtue held in no great estimation. Yet let us cling to it, with heart and soul, as a standard-bearer would to his colours. It is one of heaven's choicest gifts to our race, and one which we must assuredly hold fast, if we would hereafter pass within the gates of that celestial city, which is for-



ever closed against them "who love and make a lie." I believe that there are hundreds of sons, trained within English homes, who would rather die than pollute their lips by a falsehood, and where this seed of good remains in the heart, what a marvellous preservative is it not against innumerable evils, to which the practice of deceit at once gives easy ingress.

Our attention has of late been drawn to the political future of this land. We have felt that the great question of our connexion with the mother-country has been brought before us in a very startling—in a somewhat painful—manner. This is not the time—nor the place—to discuss such questions in full, yet they have their moral—their religious—aspect. Our Lord has told us that "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth;" and I am assured that something far more than any so-called material prosperity goes to constitute the true life of a nation. There are a thousand ties to bind us to our old island home, apart from any advantages of military protection or of commercial interest. These are thought by some to be very weak—uncertain—bonds; and it is much to be regretted that, even at home, because the external advantages resulting from the union are considered to be questionable or precarious, some few at

least have ventured to suggest a separation, or even a transference of our allegiance, simply on the ground of material interests. There is a national life above and beyond all these, a life of religion—of morals—of principles—of manners; a life doubted or denied by the materialist, but cherished, as the highest and holiest life, by every man whose “eyes are open.”

When a great people consents to determine its destiny solely by the answer to the enquiry, “What shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or wherewith shall we be clothed,” it surely deserves, and shall as surely inherit, the curse which lighted on the murmuring Israelites, “He gave them their desire, but sent leanness withal in their soul.” Leanness, indeed, for many a long day of darkness and disgrace—abject poverty in respect of every gift of soul and spirit—must be the assured portion of those who would thus sell their birthright “for one morsel of meat.” The choicer blessings of Almighty God can never attend those who would thus ignore the highest endowments and aspirations of their nature, they seem, indeed, to realize but too truly the quaint, yet forcible, description of the poet,

——— but man is wanting there,  
His very essence melted into air,  
And, in his stead, a creature subtler far

Than all the beasts that in the forest are  
Or the green field, but also cursed above  
Them all, condemned that bitterest curse to prove,  
“ Upon thy belly creep, and, for thy fee,  
“ Eat dust, as long as thou hast leave to be.”

The continuance of our connexion with the mother country is mainly to be valued (and we cannot value it too highly), on account of the powerful influence which it must necessarily, though for the most part insensibly, exert, in a thousand different ways, in moulding the future character, religious and social—intellectual and moral—of the people of this land.

But, brethren, I must not neglect to remind you of the charitable character of the society which I have now the privilege to address. Your offerings are sought in order to enable this society to extend more efficient aid to our fellow-countrymen, who reach these shores in need of succour, or who have fallen into distress and destitution while residing amongst us. You are well aware that the measure of relief which the society has hitherto been able to extend in any individual instance is very scanty: it is probable also that during the coming season, unusual demands may be made upon it, both on account of the increase of immigration, and, as is but too likely, by the prevalence of disease amongst us.

Should there, however, be no such unusual demand, a far larger sum than the Society has hitherto administered, would be employed, with very happy effect, in relieving more adequately the many cases of distress which are ordinarily brought under its notice. I would earnestly impress on all Englishmen here present the duty of endeavoring to induce others to enroll themselves as members of the Society, and also of promoting contributions to its small funded property, which might, with very good results, be largely increased.

In fine, let us recognize, brethren, our duty as Christians, whose country—whose citizenship—is in heaven. That is our true home; and if, in looking back to our early days, we can remember aught for which we feel that, as Christian men, we owe God thanks—if we can remember quiet happy homes, in which we were taught to reverence our Heavenly Father—to love our gracious Redeemer; if we can look back on sacred times and places, the memory of which can never perish—on kind words of instruction or admonition spoken to us on God's behalf; then let us make it our prayer and our effort that here too our children and our children's children may find homes like the homes of England—may be subjected to the same elevating and purifying influences—brought up in the nurture and admonition of the

Lord—taught to walk in the good old paths, to serve the God of their fathers, to honour their parents, to love the truth, and to do that which is lawful and right.



