

A SERMON:

PREACHED

AT THE CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST,

TORONTO,

ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 18th, 1863,

ON OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF

THE REV. THOMAS SMITH KENNEDY,

FIRST INCUMBENT OF THAT CHURCH.

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SERMON.

PSALM xc., v. 12.—“So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”

If we carefully consider the nature of the impression which is made upon our minds by the death of others, we shall, I think, be compelled to allow that it very frequently, if not universally, bears witness to the fact that we have not as yet learned the great lesson which in the text the Psalmist prays God to teach him. I do not mean—far from it—that if this lesson were duly learned, it would make us insensible to the bitter nature of that penalty which has been attached to man's transgression—of that death which entered into our world by sin. I do not mean that this lesson, laid to heart, would render us one whit the less disposed to weep with them that weep; but it surely would spare us that painful oppressive sense of surprise and insecurity which is often the *main* impression conveyed to us by the death of others; an appalling sense of danger resembling that which a man might feel, who, while walking with confidence by night on a path which he deemed secure, should discover, by a sudden gleam of light, a precipice yawning at his feet.

The truth is that the great majority of men, for a large portion of their lives at least, do not number their days at all, and they consequently feel—if they feel aught—a most painful shock when they behold the days of another thus sternly and irreversibly numbered. Men, for the most part, and for a very long time, do not lift up their eyes to the horizon which bounds their earthly future; they will think and speak of the morning—the noon—perhaps of the evening of their life, but they do not look on to the actual sunset—to the night which must surely come.

We may observe again how little disposed we are to measure or number our future days by the past, how we will persist in regarding as indefinitely prolonged a period which we know by past experience to be brief indeed. A man may not expect to live more than ten or twenty years, yet he allows himself to regard those ten or twenty years as a far longer—ampler—space than ten or twenty years appear to him as he measures them back upon the path which he has already trodden.

And if men thus fail to number their days in respect of the general limit imposed on the duration of human life, still more do they fail to number them in respect of their extreme uncertainty. This is the hardest, the most humiliating and painful lesson; and we are very slow to learn it. We feel how very far we are from having learned it, when the life of another is suddenly cut short, and when we are thus compelled, for the moment at least, to account of our life as something far less stable—far less secure—than we are prone to think it.

Nor is it to be wondered at that men should be slow to learn this lesson, so long as they consent not to appropriate *all* that divine instruction to which the text refers. It is a thankless, profitless task to number our days, except it be to apply our hearts unto wisdom; unto the soothing—cheering—strengthening wisdom of the gospel of Christ, which assures us that our brief uncertain life is not a thing despised by Him who gave it; that our frail humanity is pitied and cherished by Him—that His wisdom and His love have circumscribed our narrow span—that His wisdom and His love have appointed that we should not know what a day may bring forth.

We must be careful to accept God's truth as a whole, and we must remember that that truth is taught both by nature and by Revelation; in the laws of the kingdom of Providence, and in the doctrines and precepts of the kingdom of grace. It is most unwise and ungrateful to neglect any part of this teaching, and the unhappy result of such neglect is that we too surely misinterpret that part of it which forces itself upon

our attention. The lessons of Providence and of experience are, to fallen man, necessarily sorrowful and humiliating; yet are we not prone to accept these alone, because we cannot escape them; and to refuse to apply our hearts to that divine wisdom which is stored for us in the Revelation of Himself which God has made by His Son; a wisdom which is designed to be the filling up—the corrective—of the lessons of Providence, interpreting to us their dark riddles, and shedding the light of heavenly hope and consolation over a gloom which man could not otherwise endure?

Do not men too often permit themselves to think that *all* which God would teach us is sad and humbling—that His word would bid us cease to enjoy life—that we must, if we listen to His voice, be ever anticipating evil and rejecting enjoyment as a thing unfit for man, who “hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery”? If this were *all* that God would teach us, does not His Apostle suggest to us that there would be no reasonable mode of refuting the sordid maxim of the sensualist, “Let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die”?

But this is not *all* God’s teaching. He did not mean us to be all our life subject to bondage through the fear of death. His blessed Son came to deliver us from this very fear. He who gave us our powers of mind and body—our rich gifts of understanding and of feeling—did not, we may be sure, intend that these powers should be paralysed by a terrible and overwhelming dread. He did not design us to abandon the pursuit of knowledge—the cultivation of the affections—self-improvement and the advancement of our race—all the high aims and purposes which belong to us as immortal beings—under an oppressive and abiding consciousness of our mere mortality. Our Heavenly Father—our Mediator and Redeemer—the blessed Comforter—have other lessons for human hearts than these; God would indeed teach us to move with a chastening and purifying awe along our brief and uncertain course, he would indeed have us guardedly and vigilantly hold our lives

in our hands as gifts which may at any moment be recalled ; but He would, by this very awe, by this guarded and vigilant attitude, prepare us to make the noblest use of life—the noblest use of all our powers ; and, to animate us in this dedication of ourselves to His service, he has assured us that our labour shall not be in vain in the Lord ; that we are to be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in His work, even because He has given us the victory over death and the grave through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Nature and experience teach us but too plainly how bitter death is as the common destiny of man—how painful and appalling it is in individual instances ; and we are too prone to forget that the word of God—the gospel of Christ—would mitigate this bitterness, would soothe our pain and abate our instinctive dread, would teach us so to live that we may never be afraid to die—so to live as that death may never be to us the abrupt interruption of a thoughtless course, the fearful catastrophe of a sinful course, something standing in terrible contrast with all the imaginations and purposes of the past life ; but much rather the goal of a race which has been duly run—the timely close of a day well spent—approaching as nearly as may be, in its moral aspect at least, to the blessed departure of him of whom we read, “and Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.”

I have said, *in its moral aspect at least*, because it is well that we should bear in mind that there is every reason to believe that God designed death, in its physical aspect, to be most mournful and revolting to mankind. It is, in itself, the fruit the wages of sin—and, in God’s gracious purpose, a corrective of sin ; and so long as moral evil prevails in our world ; so long as we are conscious of its presence—its power within ourselves ; so long must we humbly acquiesce in that dread physical evil, which was, we may believe, wisely and beneficently designed, to be a visible type and memorial of this deadly disease of the soul—a stern yet most wholesome rebuke of that idolatry of the lower—

baser—portion of our nature to which we are so prone. Surely we may have seen sometimes how the wasting of pining sickness, or the agony of acute suffering—how the anticipation of the dissolution of the body has served to purify and exalt the souls of those who have been subjected to these visitations of the Almighty; and also how these “spectacles of mortality” have wrought upon those who have witnessed them, teaching them, as nothing less could teach; the utter emptiness—the miserable falsehood—of those deceits of the world and of the flesh which are yet, to many of us, so fatally alluring. We may indeed well think with shame and sorrow that we need these bitter lessons of the vanity of man, but let us not doubt that we do need them; let us be sure that our heavenly Father chastens us even thus for “our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness.”

Be it then our deep conviction that the wisdom to which we are to apply our hearts, as the result of duly numbering our days, is no cold cruel philosophy which shall teach us to despise life—to harden our hearts—to stifle our natural affections, and to await in gloomy indifference our inevitable end; but, much rather, a holy and heavenly wisdom, which tells us of days which are not numbered—of life everlasting; which bids us regard the death of the righteous as a “sleeping in Jesus,” and teaches us to seek for ourselves their safety—their blessedness—by repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, by the renunciation of that sin which is the sting of death, and by a loving and obedient trust in Him who is the life of them that believe and the Resurrection of the dead.

And when, brethren, can we be more solemnly called upon to number our days, and to apply our hearts to this sacred wisdom, than when the grave has just closed upon a beloved and familiar friend, the pastor of this flock of Christ, the teacher of its babes, the minister to its sick members, the carer for its poor. Lessons fit for all seasons are especially to be taken home at seasons such as these, when the voice of God in His Providence

concurr with the teaching of His holy Word, and obliges us as it were, by the stroke of sorrow, to seek the only true comfort which the heart of man can know when it is dismayed and distressed by the bitter consequences of sin.

And, perhaps, we cannot do better than endeavour to follow in our thoughts one who has been taken from our midst, and to suffer *him* to teach us once more the great lesson which we have so often heard, though we can scarcely have taken it sufficiently to heart. Holy Scripture draws for the most part a close veil over the future state—we know not how the departed are occupied—in what way they are employed to the glory of God and for the good of others and of themselves. But, at all events, Holy Scripture forbids our entertaining the desolate unchristian notion of a long slumber of the soul; we cannot think that this unconscious state is “the being with Christ” which St. Paul accounted to be “far better” than any life on earth could be. Surely he would have accounted it “far better” to be toiling still and suffering still for the sake of Christ and His elect, than to be “lying in this cold oblivion.” No—angels carried Lazarus into Abraham’s bosom, and “he was comforted;” and our Lord said to the penitent thief, “To-day thou shalt be with me in Paradise.” They who are gone from us, live to God elsewhere. We know not, as I said, the manner of their life; yet surely, if they live, they remember what they were so lately; their recent walk in life—their duties—their trials—their temptations—the many human souls with whom, in the time of their probation, they came into closer or more distant contact. I cannot but think that the great reality of that future state may be very vividly brought home to us by addressing to ourselves the enquiry, how one, with whom we lately moved on earth, looks back on his own path and on ours—on all the many questions in which he felt with us a common interest—on all those solemn matters which pertain to Christian belief and practice.

We cannot but think that, in its new condition, the soul sees in a new light the history of the past—things

which are to us objects of faith, are to it no longer so—the mists of this dim spot have past away—and in the bright light of assured certainty it now views at least very many of those great realities which it behoves us here to know and believe for our soul's health. Could the departed faithful visit us again—look upon us, speak to us, does not our conscience anticipate the gaze which we should meet, the message which we should hear? It may be that we could not bear to hear, as they would tell us, the miserable folly of indifference to the soul's health, the suicidal madness of wilful sin. Is there any dread warning of the word of God, which would not be yet more awful on their lips?—any gracious promise of the Redeemer of which they would not remind our dull hearts with an earnestness unknown to those who plead for Christ on earth? Knowing what they do—must they not feel, in the words of one who has now, as we trust, joined their blessed company, “a passionate longing to tell us to strive for the strait gate whilst we may, and let nothing on earth interfere to rob us of the joys they know by experience God has in store for them that love Him.” We may, without doubt, profitably converse thus in thought with the dead; and may be aided by our recollection of them, and by our persuasion of what must be their convictions now, to form a less warped—a less unrighteous—judgment of the great matters which concern our spiritual well-being.

But again, may we not *as individuals* hold proper intercourse with our departed friends? Are their last words on earth remembered, as characterized by a peculiar truthfulness and intensity of feeling—did the approach of death give a deep reality to the last farewell words? and would there not now be something yet more moving—more cogent—in their address to a child—to a friend—to a suffering or to an erring member of the flock of Christ? Does not the departed read us now as he read us not heretofore—could he not now, as a skilled physician, lay his hand on the seat of our special spiritual disease—and

would he not now, with honest and fearless charity, give us plain intimation of our danger? Self-knowledge and self-examination may tell each of us what the word of warning or exhortation would be to himself; true it is that word is *not* spoken, but let us lay to heart the conviction that there was one lately amongst us, who now reads us far more truly, in the light of that other world, than he read us here; and who would speak to us, in thrilling tones, all—and more than all—which our own conscience feebly whispers.

But again, we may think profitably of the dead by remembering and cherishing their good example. When a friend dies how instinctively do our thoughts dwell upon his excellencies. It is right that they should do so; this is an act of natural piety. And here too we may learn a lesson of wisdom. Do we not sometimes commend the dead for that for which we never commended them when living? Do not these unaccustomed commendations sometimes sound strangely in our mouths, and are we not ourselves conscious of some insincerity in thus dwelling on points of conduct of which we have been careless in our own practice, and which we have ordinarily viewed with indifference, or perhaps with dislike, in the case of living men? Let us be sure that in such instances we render a spontaneous testimony to the truth which is beyond suspicion. We shew our inward conviction of the great ends for which life is given us, and we rejoice to dwell on aught which betokened, in the instance of the departed, a love of God and of man for God's sake.

We may then, I am assured, learn from the example of our departed brother, the value of unwearied activity, and of practical benevolence. One who has known him throughout his whole ministerial life, bears witness to the great assiduity with which he laboured both as a catechist and as an ordained minister of the Church; discharging from 1838, when he was ordained deacon, until 1852, when he came to Toronto, an amount of duty in a country mission which few clergymen have ever attempted. His zeal and activity as secretary of the Church Society of this diocese are known to us all; and to

you especially are well known his labours in establishing this church and in forming and ministering to this congregation. In every benevolent and charitable undertaking his services were cordially and untiringly bestowed; and his last journey from Toronto was undertaken when he was little fit to travel, on a mission of kindness to a family in the neighbourhood which had been lately involved in the same calamity which has now visited his own.

Let us learn a lesson from his active discharge of duty, from his unwearied benevolence. This let us take to heart; and of himself, beyond this, let our words be few; remembering that we are in the presence of Almighty God—and that, if any thought beyond this be needed to check our utterance, the thought of the dead is here—who would, more solemnly than any monitor on earth, bid us withhold any further tribute which friendship or affection might dictate. “To me it is a very small thing to be judged of you or of man’s judgment,” said St. Paul; and, from that other world, his words we may be sure are echoed with yet deeper emphasis. “Judge nothing before the time until the Lord come, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the hearts, and then shall every man have praise of God.”

A solemn hour like this would be worse than thrown away, if the preacher unworthily suffered any one here present to bear away with him the impression that he had vainly adventured to anticipate the sentence which must proceed alone from the judgment seat of Christ. It is the Christian’s privilege to *hope* for the departed. Less than hope is to the mourner misery, and to the departed lack of charity. More than hope is presumption, dangerous to ourselves, and, we may be well assured, in the judgment of the departed most unwise. True alike to the best instincts of nature and to the teaching of Revelation our church puts in our mouths the language of *hope* as we stand beside the open grave; we pray that “when we shall depart this life, we may rest in Christ, as our *hope* is this

our brother doth :” let us be well content to cherish that blessed hope—the healer of hopeless sorrow—the counsellor of godly fear ; a hope which soothes our pious longing for the well-being of the dead—a hope which alike animates and chastens our own souls. Let us cherish this hope all our lives long—working out our own salvation with fear and trembling ; so that at the last, when this word of hope is uttered on earth over the grave of each amongst us, there may be joy in heaven, in the presence of the angels of God, over one more human soul which has safely passed the waves of this troublesome world.
