

Passiontide Sermons  
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SERMON XVII.  
THE TRUE LIFE OF MAN.

Preached at Christ Church on the Second Wednesday in Lent, Feb. 14, 1883.

St. Luke xii. 15.

A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.

THIS is an instance of our Lord's manner of taking occasion, when a particular incident comes before Him, to proclaim a truth of world-wide import. The truth is broader and deeper than is needed for the immediate purpose: but then, in the eyes of the Universal Teacher, the particular case is not only to be considered in itself; it furnishes an opportunity for proclaiming something that shall concern and interest the world. Our Lord had come to a pause in His public teaching, when it occurred to a Jew who was listening that a person of such influence and ascendancy might possibly help him towards attaining a private and domestic object, which he had greatly at heart. This Jew was a younger son, who could not easily forgive his elder brother for enjoying a double share of their father's estate. The elder brother, it is plain, was also one of our hand, it may be taken for certain that he had no mind to part with any portion of his estate, or the appeal against him would not have been necessary. "Master," cried the younger man, "speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me."

Our Lord might, it is clear, have met this appeal by a direct discussion of its intrinsic merit. But in fact, placing Himself at the point of view of the speaker, who could not yet know at all what He Himself really was, He asks what commission He could be supposed to hold for deciding such questions at all. "Man, who made Me a judge or divider over you?" And then, as if glancing at both the brothers—the elder, who held so tenaciously to his legal fortune, and the younger, who was so eager to share it—He rises into a higher atmosphere, and His words become at once instructive to all men and for all time. "Take heed," He said, "and beware of covetousness," for one reason among others, but especially for one—that covetousness involves a radical mistake as to the true meaning and nature of life: "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." He does not deny that something is needed to sustain physical life; but He has His eye upon the tendency to accumulate a great deal more, and to throw all the energy of thought and work into this accumulation. Man's life consists not, He says, in this kind of abundance, which is made up of things which he possesseth. If we could forget who the Speaker is, some of us might, at the first thought, be disposed to say that this is a truism. No doubt it is. So true is it, that it was a commonplace among the heathen. We may remember the lines in which even the light-hearted poet of the Augustan age tells how "neither house nor farm, nor store of brass and gold, can banish fever from the ailing body, or care from the mind."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Non domus aut fundus, non aeris acervus et auri

Understand life as you will, and the Sacred words correspond with everyday experience, that life is not any-thing external to man. Every invalid knows that his physical life consists not in the costly medicines or professional skill which he can command, but in the renewed vigour of his bodily frame and its vital functions. Every student knows that his mental life consists, not in the books on his shelves—not even in the thoughts of other men industriously copied into his note-books; but in the appropriation of these treasures by his memory and his thinking faculty, in their being interwoven with and made a part of the texture and system of his mind. And every Christian knows, or should know, that his spiritual life consists, not in the possession of a Bible, or in the near neighbourhood of Churches and Sacraments, or of Christian friends, or of other religious opportunities, but in that which is “hid with Christ in God;” in the incorporation with his inmost self of that Truth and Grace of which religious opportunities, the highest and the lowest, are but the channels. So obvious is this, that when it is denied that life—something always and essentially internal and personal—consists in that which is distinct from and independent of us, we are at first tempted, if not to ask, yet to think, “Who ever said that it did?” Yes, the saying is a truism. But there are truisms and truisms. There are truisms which are admitted to be such in the conduct as well as by the speech of men. And there are truisms which are never questioned in conversation, and which are rarely acted on. To insist on truisms of the former class is no doubt an impertinence; to insist on truisms of this latter kind again and again, and even with importunity, is by no means superfluous; and the saying of our Lord is undoubtedly a truism of this description. The distinction which He draws between what a man has and what he is, is as obvious, when stated, as it is commonly overlooked. The saying that life consists not in what we have but in what we are, is as true as the practice of making life consist not in what we are but in what we have, is common. Intellectually speaking, the world did not need these words of our Lord. Practically speaking, there is no one of His sayings which it could less dispense with. For just consider the two brothers. They both knew perfectly that what our Lord said was true. They had learnt the truth from their own Hebrew Scriptures, and yet they were acting as if it were an ascertained illusion. The determination to retain the larger share of the property, the determination to have it divided if possible, meant that in the practical judgment of both the brothers life did somehow consist in possessing property. All the energy and resolve with which we pursue that about which we feel most deeply was thrown into this question of retaining or dividing that bit of property. Each would have said, no doubt, that his life did not consist in possessing it. Each certainly acted as if it did. Truism or truth, there is no mistake as to the importance which our Lord attached to what He then announced. He taught it in act as well as by word of mouth. Unlike ourselves, He could determine the circumstances in which He would enter this world, and with which He would surround Himself in it. And what did He advisedly choose? A poor home, poor people for His Mother and Foster-father, poor men for His companions the foxes had holes, and the birds of the air had nests, but the Son of Man had not where to lay His Head. He would not accept consideration and position even from the poor: He would not be made a King or an umpire. And at last He gave Himself up to be stripped even of His poor garments and to

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Aegroto domini deduxit corpore febres,  
Non animo curas ——”

Hor. i *Ep.* ii. 47.

die in agony on the Cross. "Ye know," said His Apostle in after years, "ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich." And the wealth which He thus earns for us is largely moral wealth; it lies above all else in making our life consist in something else than the things which we possess.

Certainly, judging from experience, it would seem that there is a constant tendency in our fallen nature to run counter to the truth which our Lord proclaims; to create, if we may so put it, a new centre of gravity in life, so that we come to act and speak and think more with reference to something that is altogether outside us than to the true centre of our existence. And this tendency is a result of that momentous event in the earliest history of our race, which we term the Fall.

For in his fallen state, and so far as he is stripped of God's supernatural grace, man's solitary self is too thin and feeble a spirit to persist in independence of the outer world of matter; it exerts upon him evidently and always a fatal and all but resistless attraction; it attracts him through that side of his composite nature which belongs to it; it lures or draws or drags him down until his personal self, his spirit, is entangled in and detained by it; until, victim as he is of its ceaseless and subtle importunity, he has fallen, at first little by little, but in the end completely, under its sway,—under the empire of material nature. Of this fact the Pantheism of the ancient world, which was at the root of its idolatries, was an expression; it was an unconscious attempt, by way of after-thought, to make man's degradation respectable by decorating it with theory. And within the frontiers of Christendom, wherever the grace of Regeneration has been forfeited, the old attraction is at once felt; modern civilisation imposes on it some characteristic form; society takes the place of wild nature; and life, still practically made to consist in that which is external to man, is also made to consist in that which society prizes most.

Look at our great cities. For millions of human beings the face of nature scarcely exists; they live in these vast centres of population, where man has traced his own ungraceful inscriptions over the fair handiwork of God; and the matter which they extract from the bowels of the earth or which they collect from its extremities, to wield, to mould, to refine, to analyse, to reproduce in a thousand disguises, seems, as they handle it, to thicken the mental air they breathe; to bury thought, imagination, affection, will, in its dull encompassing folds; to penetrate their immaterial being and impregnate it with qualities which might, if possible, even materialise thought; to make man, undying spirit that he is, forget his true value and his destiny, and think of himself as though some grains or nuggets of the matter around him were more precious than he. What wonder if, where little or no light from above illuminates these populations, so conducive by their varied industries to our material prosperity as a nation, but ministering to it so often at so vast a cost,—what wonder if there should be forgetfulness of that wherein man's true life consists: if, when labour is rewarded by wealth, that life should be sought in something altogether external; in the tangible products of his brains or of his hands; in the abundance of acres or houses or railway shares or other symbols of material wealth of which he may have succeeded in possessing himself!

It was for men of this temper, though living in an agricultural district, that our Lord in His condescending mercy uttered the parable about the man whose fields brought forth plenteously, and who proposed to pull down his barns and build greater, and who whispered to his soul that he should take his ease, eat and drink and be merry for many a

year to come, and to whom God said, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee."

An intellectual society is apt to congratulate itself on its freedom from the vulgar care for money which is characteristic of a manufacturing town; though it may perhaps be a question whether it is really justified in doing so. But a man who is careless about money for its own sake may still make his life consist in works of art or of literature. The true posture of his mind is to a certain extent disguised from his conscience, because books and pictures are associated with ideas rather than with the money which they will fetch in the market, so in making idols of them the owner may persuade himself that he is a purely intellectual or aesthetic enthusiast. But after all, they are just as much outside him as a heap of sovereigns, and he must part with them at death. What a pathetic description is that of Cardinal Mazarin, rousing himself from his dying bed at Vincennes to take a last look at the treasures which his long ascendancy in the councils of the French Monarchy had enabled him to accumulate. When his nurses and doctors were away he rose from his couch, and with his tall figure, pale and wasted, closely wrapped in his fur-lined dressing-gown, he stole into the gallery; and the Count de Brienne, who reports the scene, hearing the shuffling sound of his slippers as he dragged his limbs feebly and wearily along, hid himself behind the curtains. As, in his extreme weakness, the Cardinal had to halt almost at each step, he feebly murmured, "I must leave all this." He crawled on, however, clinging, so as to support himself, first on one object and then on another, and as at each pause, exhausted by pain and weakness, he looked around the splendid room, he said again, with a deep sigh, "I must leave all this." Then, at last, he caught sight of Brienne: "Give me your hand," he said, "I am very weak and helpless, yet I like to walk, and I have something to do in the library." And then, leaning on the Count's arm, he again pointed to the pictures. "Look at that beautiful Correggio, and this Venus of Titian, and this incomparable Deluge of Antonio Caracci. Ah! my poor friend, I must leave all this. Good-bye, dear pictures, which I have loved so well!"<sup>2</sup>

No doubt the most obvious form of the mistake against which our Lord guards us is somewhat of this kind; and yet there are other things besides gold, and acres, and pictures, and books, much less tangible and palpable, yet purely external to man, in which he may make his life consist. Such is reputation; such is social, political, academical, ecclesiastical honour, as the case may be. Many a man, whose natural instincts are too refined to allow him to care keenly for property, is even passionately desirous of honour. Every society has its own standards and certificates of honour. All the expressions of it which meet the eye and which fall upon the ear—decorations, titles, ordered precedence, the delicate and scarcely-hinted compliment, the tone and posture of calculated and restrained deference—these we find everywhere in human life, and not less than elsewhere in the life of a University. The younger of us know the pleasure which is felt at the cheers which follow an athletic victory, or a conspicuous service rendered to the college boat on the river, or a brilliant speech in the Union, or upon the generous congratulations which are called out by expected or unexpected success in the schools. And others, whom years have taught to discipline and restrain the expression of feeling, are yet fully alive to the subtle fascinations of honour, when, perhaps, some post of authority or responsibility is offered them, or some notice taken of them in a very high quarter, or some little work of theirs is favourably criticised in a German periodical, or

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<sup>2</sup> *Mémoires inédits de Louis-Henri de Loménie, Comte de Brienne* (Paris, 1828), ii. 114.

some warmth of commendation from a living friend commonly chary of his words, and not given to compliments, is indirectly conveyed to them. We all know how largely we prize these things; it is well for us if we do not make our life consist in them; for such honour, in all its forms, is no part of our real selves; it is just as much external to us as the coat we wear on our back, or the shillings in our pocket,—very close to us for the time, but very easily separable, and very certain to be separated. Well for us indeed if we deserve it, even in part; if conscience does not whisper that in welcoming it we are taking that which is not our own; as, indeed, in one sense conscience must always remind us that there is in the last resort only One Being Who can deserve, as only One Being Who can confer, true honour.

“When mortals praise thee, hide thine eyes,  
Nor to thy Master’s wrong  
Take to thyself His crown and prize;  
Yet more in heart than tongue.”<sup>3</sup>

And anyhow, of all earthly honour, as of wealth, it is true that a man “shall carry nothing away with him when he dieth, neither shall his pomp follow him.”

There is a kind of monument more than once still to be met with in our old English Cathedrals, which was meant to teach this truth in what would now be called a realistic way. Above, perhaps, lies the figure of a great Prelate, arrayed in his full pontificals, with cope, and mitre, and pastoral staff, possibly raising his right hand as if still in the act of benediction, and surrounded with all the symbols of his high order, and his spiritual and temporal jurisdiction, while carved angels support the brodered cushion on which he rests his head, and with his feet he treads upon the young lion and the dragon—the moral, or social, or political opponents of the Church’s rule; and below this figure, so beautiful in form, so emblazoned with colour, there lies on a lower ledge another. It is a well-nigh naked corpse, emaciated almost to a skeleton, in which the ribs and joints are each articulated with a painfully literal exactness, while a worm is gnawing the vitals or protruding from the brain. Above is the Prelate still swathed and encrusted in the accumulated honours of high ecclesiastical position. Beneath is the man, lying as every man sooner or later must lie, stripped of all earthly decorations, in the nakedness and corruption of the grave. Do you say that such a conception belongs to the coarseness of mediaeval art? Do not impair the force, it may be, of even unwelcome truth by an adjective conveying a narrow and unwarranted judgment. No, that portraiture is not merely mediaeval, whatever hands may first have fashioned it; it is Christian, it is human, it is true now, it will be to the end of time, it proclaims the eternal contrast between the honour which may surround us in life, deservedly or undeservedly, and the forfeiture of all honour that cometh not from God only, which surely awaits us all in death. It is a vivid exhibition of one aspect of the truth, that “a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.”

And there are others, nobler souls, surely, than these, whom honour charms not, still less wealth, but who are the devotees of knowledge. If they said out their whole heart they would say that a man’s true life does consist in the knowledge which he possesseth. And they might be right if they meant, by the act of knowing, something more than

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<sup>3</sup> *Lyra Innocentium*, iv. 3.

apprehension by the understanding and retention by the memory; and if the Object of their knowledge were the Infinite and Everlasting God. For “this is life eternal, to know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent.” But then this knowledge which is Eternal life is something different from that to which I referred just now; it is, according to the original Bible language, an adhesion of the whole being,—of will and affections, no less than of the understanding,—to its Object. In our ordinary language, knowledge, we know, means much less than this; it means the apprehension by the understanding and reason of man, of those facts about himself and about the world around him which can be verified by observation, and which are practically useful in the conduct of life. This knowledge is sometimes called, I do not say with what reason, positive; it is triumphantly contrasted with the science of mind, and even with Divine Revelation; it is presented as solid, certain, practical; and an increasing number of minds in our day devote themselves to it with fresh enthusiasm. But it too is external to man. He apprehends it; he retains it for years; he carries it about with him; he dispenses it to others; it seems for a while to have made a home at the very centre of his being, and his memory fondles it, and his reason watches and dissects it, and his imagination decorates and dresses it up; but for all that it is not himself—it is outside his real self, and he will, one day, part company with it. Necessary truth, indeed, once ours, is, if we will, ours for ever. Such is the true knowledge of the Infinite and Eternal God; such, too, the knowledge, it may be, of truths which the constitution of our minds obliges us to recognise as necessary—as, for instance, the axioms and conclusions of mathematics, or first principles in morals—and which, as they never can have been other than true, cannot have been something eternally independent of Him Who alone is Eternal Truth, and must therefore represent, in ways which we may be allowed to understand hereafter, elements of His Eternal Being. But the greater part of what we call knowledge is very different: it is as variable, contingent, evanescent, as are its objects; and this knowledge, as the Apostle says, shall vanish away; we shall put it off as the mere dressing-gown of the soul when we lie down to die.

Nay, of this we have warnings, before we reach the end, in the change and decay of the mental powers. Some of us have perhaps known what it is to witness that solemn and mysterious judgment or dispensation of God, when a mind, richly endowed with faculties and resources, and stored with the accumulated knowledge of a lifetime, suddenly breaks down; discovers, as in a moment, that its well-tried machinery is not entirely at command; suspects that it no longer sees everything as it is, and that all is somehow distorted and awry, and so passes through painful alternations of reason and unreason,—just enough of the one to take the measure of the tragic presence of the other. And then, little by little, the internal survey of mental wealth, and the power of marshalling and administering it, becomes less and less distinct, and the inner chasms open more widely, and the darkness thickens around until, as far as this world is concerned, all has closed in night.

No, brethren, a man’s life consisteth not in that which he possesseth. “Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.” Knowledge, honour, wealth, these pass: and man’s truest life consists not in what he has but in what he is, in the relation or attitude of his will towards the Being who is the Author and the Last End of his existence. This relation, be assured, does not change, either for good or evil, as we pass through the gate

of death. If the will be self-warped, turned away from the Face of Eternal Righteousness, what it is, it will remain enduringly, and no store of material wealth, or earthly honour, or mental accomplishments can relieve this central and fatal deficiency. If, through the Redemption and Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has bought the inmost self of man back from slavery by His Precious Blood, and has given it directness and vigour by acting on it through His Spirit and His Sacraments,—if man's will has been made thus true in its aim, and free, and pliant, and vigorous in its upward movement; be sure that this, too, is a thing which lasts: this is life.

Five years before he left us, one who has since his death been much in men's minds, especially within these walls, had an illness which was of a very critical character.<sup>4</sup> For some days he said nothing, and he was supposed to be quite unconscious. After his recovery he referred, one day, to this, the presumably unconscious, part of his illness. "People thought," he said, "that I was unconscious, but the fact was, that although I could not speak I heard all that went on in the room, and I was well occupied." To the question, "What were you doing?" he answered, "By God's mercy, I could remember the Epistle for the fourth Sunday in Advent, out of the Philippians, which begins, 'Rejoice in the Lord alway.' This I made a framework for prayer; saying the Lord's Prayer two or three times between each clause, and so dwelling on the several relations of each clause to each petition in the Lord's Prayer." How he did this he explained at some length, and then added, "It lasted me, I should think, four or five hours." To the question, "What did you do after that?" he answered, "I began it over again. I was very happy: and, had it been God's will, did not wish to get better."

Yes, assuredly, a man's life does not consist in the outward things which he possesseth. Let us, in conclusion, endeavour to apply this truth to one or two parts in detail.

i. Surely it should shape and control our notions of progress, civilisation, improvement. What do men really mean, nine times out of ten, when they employ these fascinating and attractive terms? Do they not too often mean only something that takes place in that which is outside man, instead of in man's real self, the seat and centre of his life? Take an instance. I happen to go down into a country neighbourhood and meet a person who says that everything is looking up: that the progress and improvement are quite astonishing. I ask for an explanation, and he proceeds to say that a new railway has just been opened; that they are now only six hours from London; that there are now two posts in the day; that the farms are well let; that the squire has been rebuilding his cottages on an improved model; that it is a great advantage to have the telegraph, and a Post-office Savings-bank. Do I say that these things are without their value, or other than great blessings which God, in His Providence, has bestowed? Certainly not: but the question is whether they are the decisive tests of real improvement, in the life of a being like man. If man be what the Christian Revelation tells us he is,—a spirit with a material form attached to him, a spirit on probation here for a short space of years, and with an eternity before him,—how can that be any true improvement in a town or country neighbourhood which does not take account of this fundamental fact in his existence?

Surely there are many other questions to be asked and answered before our Lord Jesus Christ would have said that that neighbourhood was improved. What are the

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<sup>4</sup> The Rev. E. B. Pusey, D. D., Regius Professor of Hebrew, and Canon of Christ Church, Oxford (where this sermon was preached).

statistics of crime? what the relations of masters and servants, of parents and children? how many people say any prayers? what is the condition of the schools? what is taught in them about another life, and how, and by whom? what is the public honour paid to God in His Church or in the use of His Sacraments? what, so far as we can know, are the average dispositions of the dying? These questions go more to the root of the matter; they prove the claim to real improvement; since the true life of a neighbourhood, as of a man, consists in something else than the abundance of its material advantages, however considerable they may be.

2. Again, look at our too common way of estimating the prosperity of a Church. We count up its sacred buildings; we calculate the amount of its fixed or variable income; we survey and value the social consideration, or political weight accorded to its ministers; we regard them as members of a "profession," to be measured by the same standards of failure or success as any other,—as officers in the army or members of the bar. For us, too often, the Church is of the earth earthy, because we see in it nothing else; we are so engrossed in the study of its outer husk that we have no eye for realities within. Yet a Church is nothing, if it be not a congregation or home of souls; and the condition of these souls, their faith, their hope, their love, their repentance, their power over the insurgent forces within and the assailing forces without them, their ability to maintain true communion with the Invisible Source of life, is the point really worth thinking of. The Church, whose life, in the judgment of her members, consisteth in the abundance of outward things which she possesseth, is in fair way to lose them. It was not so when Peter said, "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee;" it will not be so when the Bride of the Immaculate Lamb is finally summoned to the Eternal Presence-Chamber.

3. Once more, what is the view we individually take, of whatever God may have intrusted us with, for a few brief years, in the way of capital and income? Do we let our heart go out into it, thinking only or chiefly of how we can increase its amount? or do we bear in mind that it is utterly outside our real selves, that we dispose of it for a very short time, and shall have to answer for our way of doing so? In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord insists on the unselfish and sincere discharge of the three leading duties of Almsgiving, Prayer, and Fasting; and of these, assuredly, the first is not the least. Only when we remember that a man's life consisteth not in the things which he possesseth, shall we know how to sit easily to property and to handle it conscientiously. There are, perhaps, some young men among my hearers who a few years hence will dispose of considerable fortunes. Depend on it, brethren, that much even here depends—nothing, perhaps, less than the safety of the social structure in this country—on the way in which you will understand your responsibilities. The strength of communistic theories, here and everywhere else, consists, not in any solid truth on which they rest, since generally they do but cover a singular background of tangled fallacies, but in the failure of so many among the wealthier classes to understand the true relations of property to life. Lent is a time for getting rid of illusions, and of this master-illusion among the rest, that there is any value whatever in property apart from the good use which we can make of it. The communism of the younger brother in the Gospel, and the resolute selfishness of the elder are equally persistent and equally deplorable. The real question for all of us is, What shall we hereafter desire to have felt about that which God has withheld? what shall we desire to have done with that which by His gift we have, be it much or little? what shall we desire ourselves to be, when we know that the end of life is close upon us? Most



assuredly that question is vital: it cannot be pondered too often or too carefully; and in answering it let us never forget that man's life—that in him which will not perish at death—"consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."