

Plain Sermons by Contributors to 'Tracts for the Times'
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SERMON LXXVIII.
VICTORY OVER THE WORLD.
(PREACHED ON LOW SUNDAY.)

1 JOHN v. 4.

“Whatsoever is born of GOD overcometh the world; and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.”

AGAIN our Church, in the Epistle selected for to-day, exhorts us to plain practical duties: she assumes that we are in earnest, that we have watched by the Cross of our LORD, borne our own after HIM, been buried in His burial, risen with our risen SAVIOUR; but yet knowing how apt we are to be satisfied with *having* felt, how men turn their very feelings, from the communion with GOD to the service of Satan, she would give them a practical direction, reminds us of our duty to overcome the world, while what calls itself the world is being overcome, and would thus teach us to condense our feelings into action, that so our “Easter fires” may burn on with the warm steady glow of single-hearted duty and service, not be like the crackling of thorns, unsubdued, shortlived, ineffectual.

In the portion, then, of St. John’s Epistle thus selected, he hath, as his wont is, in brief, calm, simple words, set before us the end of our being¹ here, victory over the world; the source of that victory, our “birth of GOD,” the means, our faith; the nature of that faith, a true confession of the Divinity of our crucified LORD; the nourishment of our faith and life, His Sacraments, the “water and blood” whereby HE “cometh” to us, and attesteth His presence by His indwelling “Spirit;” as a little before he had given us a test whereby to know whether we love GOD,—the love of our brethren, and whether our love for our brethren was real,—the steady keeping of GOD’S commandments; and this he wearies not to repeat again and again, if by any means it may fix our unstable hearts.

As Christians, our lot is to be *in* the world, yet we are not to be *of* it; we are surrounded by the world, yet in Baptism we renounced it; we are in it, as strangers and pilgrims, not belonging to it, nor it to us, but passing through it, as travellers to our home; “not taken out of it,” as our LORD prays not for His Disciples, yet “kept from the Evil One;” passing through it, but kept or guarded against it; nay, we are to be *in* the world, as HE was in the world, “not” to be *of* the world,” even as ‘HE was not *of* the world,” to be crucified to the world, and the world to us, in His Cross; to overcome it as HE overcame it.

Yet we must have much to do with it; our duties lie in it; we have to deal with it, bear our parts in it, use it and not abuse it, conquer it; it is alien from us, but by

faithfulness “in” that which is another’s, we are to be fitted to have “that which is our own,” the “true riches;” it is an enemy, yet it is to be our servant; the scene of our temptations, but the witness of our victory; it passeth away, but it is our birth-place for eternity; it draweth down to hell, yet our way of using it is to prepare us for Heaven.

It must needs then much behove us to know what this thing is, which we are to have so much to do with and so little; to have and not to love; to be tempted with and not to yield to; to be surrounded with, and yet to keep aloof from as a stranger; to have spread around us, on the right hand and the left, beautiful, inviting, lovely to the eyes, a seeming resting-place, through which we are yet to hold our course, on the narrow path, anxious only to pass through it safely, keeping our eye fixed beyond it, as we would escape the pitfalls, which open to the pit of perdition.

What then is the world which we are to overcome? what is overcoming it? what the victory, whereby we overcome it?

The world, in Holy Scripture, is the creature as opposed to the CREATOR; it is what is fleeting, as opposed to HIM Who Alone is abiding; it is what is weak, as opposed to HIM Who Alone hath might; it is what is dead, as opposed to HIM Who Alone hath life; it is what is sinful, as separate from HIM Who Alone is holy.

The “world” is everything short of GOD, when made a rival to GOD. There is, in truth, no being, but One, that is, GOD. For GOD, as HE is the source of all being, so HE upholds all. All “live and move and *have their being*” from HIM; not “*had*” it only, but “have” it; not received it once for all, as a gift to be held hereafter independently of the Giver, but *have* it. In physical nature, alike, and in moral, all existence is perpetually flowing from the one source of all existence; “My FATHER worketh hitherto, and I work.” GOD worketh but ever resteth, resteth but ever worketh; out of nothing, in the beginning HE created the heaven and the earth; out of nothing, HE still addeth to that which HE has created, so that it shall grow, multiply, not out of any power inherent in itself, but because HE addeth to what HE made. “HE upholdeth all things by the word of His power;” they subsist, because HE still continueth to speak that word, whereby HE called them into being at the first; “let them be,” and they were and are; they grow and decay, because HE giveth them increase or withdraweth it; when “HE breatheth into them, they live; when HE taketh away their breath, they die;” yea, when HE “shall let His breath go forth again,” they shall be “remade,” and the face of this our earth be renewed; the things, which shall be our food, grow, because HE “provideth corn for the earth,” and bringeth life out of death; they nourish us, because HE giveth them power, not of themselves alone, but by the “word which proceedeth out of His mouth:” we grow, because HE addeth to our stature; sleep, because HE giveth us rest; awake, by a daily resurrection from the dead, because HE, morning by morning, “lighteneth our eyes that we sleep not in death.” Holy Scripture, lest in the creature which we see, we should forget the CREATOR Whom we do not see, and in the laws which HE giveth to His creation, and which His creation (man only and evil spirits excepted), obey, forget HIM Who giveth these laws, speaketh continually of GOD’S doings as ever present: HE upholdeth, HE

giveth, HE feedeth, HE clotheth the grass; HE giveth to the bare grain which we sow, a body, as it pleaseth, HIM, and to every seed his own body; HE giveth the increase; what abideth, continueth according to His ordinances; that so whether things pass away, or continue, or are renewed, we may know that it is by and in HIM that they are begun, continued, and have their end, from Whom they came forth. Every thing, from the highest Archangel to the worm, hath of itself nothing, existeth through His will alone, from Whom it first had its existence; their life is *from* His life; nay, in all things capable thereof, we know their life *is* His life *in* them; because HE lives, they live also; they live in the light of His countenance; they live, because they depend upon HIM, and thereby are capable of receiving His life; as, when all corruption shall be severed off, and the end of this imperfect life come, and His glory perfected, then shall GOD be “all in all,” all things in all beings, the sole Life of all which liveth, destroying all death by being alone in all, their Life.

Even, in this life, as far as any of us do live, we live in HIM, and HE is our life; “he that hath the Son,” it was read, “hath life,” the SON of GOD is HIMSELF their life; they have life in them, because they have, through His indwelling Spirit, the SON *in* them. “HE that believeth on ME,” our gracious LORD saith, “*hath* everlasting life;” for (it follows) “I am that Bread of Life;” by receiving that Bread of Life, we have HIM dwelling in us; and when HE dwelleth in us, we “have everlasting life” in us. And St. John, as he begins this Epistle with speaking of HIM “the eternal Life Which was with the FATHER, and was manifested unto us,” so he ends it, by declaring that “we are in HIM that is true, in His SON JESUS CHRIST; this is the true GOD, and eternal life.” The eternal life, which was with GOD, appeared among us who were dead, that we receiving HIM, might live in HIM, and HE in us, and so we might have eternal life in us, because we have in us HIM Who is eternal life.

Since, then, GOD is the life of every thing which liveth, in whatever degree any thing be without GOD, separate from GOD, it is without life; it is death and not life; by depending upon GOD, hanging upon HIM, cleaving to HIM, doth every thing live; Angel and Archangel live by beholding His face; by turning away from HIM, we turn from our life, and so must needs turn to death. We were made for HIM, to live to HIM, in HIM, through HIM; we were made to be lords over our own bodies, lords of this inferior creation, to serve HIM; man fell by loving what GOD had created rather than GOD; and now that we have been raised in CHRIST, our trial is whether we will love GOD rather than what HE hath created, and love what HE hath created, in and for HIM only.

The world, then, is every thing regarded as distinct from GOD, beside GOD; it matters not whether they be the things of the sense or the things of the mind: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, or the pride of life; things without us, or things within; nay, it matters not so far, whether they be the things the most debased, (which we have in common with the beasts which perish), or *humanly* the most exalted, the highest things of intellect (these too we have in common with the devils, and the Apostle classes together “the lusts of the flesh and the pride of life”), it matters not thus far, whether they be the

purest *human* affections, the highest *human* exertions, the noblest *human* ends; whether they be things of religion, in which men are seeking themselves and their own glory, or things of devils; if so be that they end in themselves, are set up as idols, bind down the mind to themselves, and withdraw it from GOD, engross it, they are parts of “the world;” it is “the world” in some form more gross or more refined, which is thus stealing away the heart from its one end, GOD, there are but two ways of being, a being in GOD, which is life, and a being out of GOD, which is the world and death: and that which is not in GOD, and leadeth not to HIM, but away from HIM, is of “the world” and of death, and tendeth to death. He hath said, “thou shalt have no other gods beside ME;” it matters not, then, thus far, what we set up beside GOD, whether it be “all the kingdoms of this world and the glory of them,” or the meanest temptation to the most sordid soul, the “flesh-pots of Egypt” or the miser’s gain, if it be beside GOD, it is a falling from GOD, the worshipping the god of this world for the true GOD. HE hath said, “thou shalt not make any graven image,” and declares His judgment against all such as “set up their idols in their heart;” it matters not, then, thus far, whether the idols be of Nebuchadnezzar’s gold, or of mire and clay; whether it be husband, or wife, or child, or appetite, or comfort, or self-enjoyment, or glory, and this world’s honour, and the praise of men even for faithful service in the things of our GOD, it is an idol, so soon as it is put in the place of GOD. It is first prized with HIM, then beside HIM; then to the exclusion of HIM; then, (unless HE snatch such an one out of the burning,) against HIM.

I have said throughout, “it matters not *thus far*,” because though every thing which draws people for the time down to itself, is for the time an idol, and belongeth to the world and is offensive to GOD; yet hath HE compassion upon us; though all is sinful, yet is not all equally sinful; all is to be striven against, yet doth not all equally bind captive; all ensnareth, yet all is not wilful; all is a rival to GOD, yet doth not all (GOD forbid) equally extinguish or diminish the love of GOD, and His life in us; some sins are done with a high hand, and all but extinguish life at once; some are the rust, which, through human frailty and for want of watchfulness, creeps slowly over the fine gold and dims it, so that GOD casts it into the fire of affliction, that it be not spoiled; some are the stains, which cleave to good men well-nigh to the end, the weakness entailed perhaps by former sins, from which, amid tears for past and present failings, they are striving to be freed.

But such being the world, the love of any thing out of GOD, for GOD, the having any end of our life but GOD, what is victory over the world? Plainly, not victory over the one or other thing, while in others people are led captive; not soundness in one part, while another is diseased; not the breaking down of the images of Baal and Ashtaroth and the sun, or even the calves at Bethel and at Dan, while the “high places” are left; not a halting, uneven service, one limb free, while another is chained; one, whole and capable of motion, while another is stricken with the palsy; not to cultivate one or other grace which maybe easier to us, leaving undone or imperfect, what to us may be more difficult; but it is, to count the cost, to love nothing out of GOD, or instead of GOD or beside GOD;

to have no end but HIM; to be willing to part with every thing but HIM; to desire to gain nothing but HIM; to be content, (with St. Paul and under his feet,) to “count all things but dung that we may win CHRIST,” and with St. Paul too, to “suffer the loss of all” beside; to watch ourselves, and “pluck out our right eye, if it cause us to offend,” if so be we may “enter into life;” to take it humbly and penitently, if it please GOD that “the sight of our eyes, it also shall go from” us. It is to cut off, as far as we may, every hold which every thing out of GOD has over us; to study wherein we are weak, and there seek in His strength to be made strong: he your temptation the love of pleasure, to forego it; of food, to restrain it, as well by fasting as by habitual self-denial; of praise, to put forward others rather than yourself; of being right in the sight of men, be content to be misjudged, and to keep silence; of being listened to, keep silence, while others, inferior if so be, interrupt; of taking the first place, take the last; of self-indulgence, use hardness; of display, cut off the occasions, and give to the poor; of heaping around thee things pleasant to the eye, part with them; of having thine own will, practise the submission of it to the wills of others; consider not what by GOD’S grace may be good in thee, but study what through thine own negligence may be lacking to thee, what defects may have been stealing over thee, what thorns may have grown up with thy good seed, and strive, as one who hath a weighty work, a short time, and “the night coming when no man can work.”

And this struggle must be not for a time only, but perseveringly; not in one way but in all ways; not in one sort of trials, but in all: whatever temptations GOD permit Satan to prepare for us, whatever trials HE HIMSELF bring upon us. It avails not to be patient in sorrow or sickness, if we become careless when it is withdrawn; to be humble to men, if we become self-satisfied with our humility; to overcome indolence, if we forget GOD in our activity; to be busied, even with Martha, in serving our LORD, if we forget thereby to sit at His feet and hear His words. It is a deadly struggle wherein we are engaged; a struggle for life and death, for life and death eternal; our enemy subtler than we, having access to us on every side, seeing where we are unguarded or off our guard, and thrusting at us there; quick in changing his ground, if he find us prepared; leaving us even for a while, if so he may afterwards surprise us; suiting his temptations to our different periods of life, our outward circumstances, our change of habits, our state of grace, and ready to persuade us that we are conquerors, simply because he does not assault us as he did before, but is employing perhaps a subtler snare, or dressing it in some different form; overpowering us by assaults, or by craft ensnaring us; and our own hearts, the while, ready to betray us, and the flesh weak, and ready to yield to sin, and the world enticing, and things unseen faint, or not present to the mind, and our judgments obscured and dulled by former sin, so that we have no longer that instinctive insight into right and wrong, which GOD imparts to His most faithful children.

Alas! what is life, but as was said of old, “all trial?” “Is not the life of man upon earth all trial, without any interval?” Alas! who if he looked on the trial only, or looked on all of life and all its trials at once, or on himself and his own strength alone, would not faint and grow weary? Alas, who that is in earnest, does not often grow weary and faint-

hearted, and would not be glad to lay down his life, and like the hireling, long for life's evening, to end this struggle and be at rest, were he sure of being there owned as one though of the hired servants, though of the least and last of the hired servants, in the house where he was born a son.

Such were life in itself; such to us, if left to ourselves: but GOD be thanked, we are not left to ourselves, to perish. Greater is HE that is in us, than he that is in the world; we are not only the frail creatures, which we seem, flesh and blood, but we are spirit, through the indwelling Spirit; we have been born, not only of the earth, earthly, but "from above," by a heavenly birth, of GOD; and so, since born of GOD, we are stronger than the world, and the things of the world, and the god of this world; being born of GOD, we must needs be, (if we use the strength given us) stronger than any thing which is not GOD, stronger than the world and its temptations; HE, our MASTER, saith "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." HE hath overcome it *for* us, by His unsinning obedience; HE hath overcome it *for* us, by vanquishing our enemy, its god and the master to whom we had sold ourselves, in our nature; henceforth HE will overcome it also in ourselves: HE hath made us members of HIMSELF, Who hath overcome the world; and as HE overcame it, so will HE give us, whom HE hath made His members, power to triumph over it, and to share His triumph. HE hath bound the strong man, and set us his "lawful prisoners" free.

This then is "the victory which overcometh the world, our faith," which realizeth things invisible, looks beyond the world to HIM Who hath overcome the world, looks to HIM as the SON OF GOD, as well as HIM, Who for us men and our salvation became man. So that we must beware not only that we are in earnest striving, but striving with the right faith, that is, with the faith in which we were baptized, the faith in the HOLY AND UNDIVIDED TRINITY. The sad, and for what we see, unrecovered falls of men, once esteemed in the Church, attest, that in faith as in practice, "narrow is the way which leadeth unto life." He who believeth not in the SON OF GOD, as HE hath declared HIMSELF, how shall he have the victory, when he hath not the right armour? How shall he have victory when, the Apostle says, "he hath not life?" And to this there is the more need that we should take heed in these last days, when men have taken upon themselves to decide what is saving truth, otherwise than the Church Catholic ever taught; when they will make such portion of the truth as they think calculated to affect the heart, alone sufficient, instead of "contending earnestly for the" whole "truth once committed to the saints." The experience of the whole Church shows that whoso tampereth with the faith, knoweth not to what he may not be abandoned; whoso parteth but a little, as he thinketh, from the unity of the Faith, or of CHRIST'S Body, in the end, (it is too often to be feared,) wholly departeth.

And they who confess this faith in the SON OF GOD, (St. John goes on to say) must cleave to HIM, (as so many of you do, and we trust more and more will do,) in His Sacraments. "This is HE that cometh by water and Blood, even JESUS CHRIST: not by water only, but by water and Blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth," i. e. HE who poured out of His most precious Side water and Blood, still

cometh to us, unseen, through the water of Baptism, whereby HE washed us, and the Blood of our Redemption, whereby HE refreshes us, out of His wounded Side, wherein we hope HE will hide us, and the Spirit whereby HE sanctifieth us, and cleanseth us for His indwelling, and in cleansing, dwelleth. By these HE cometh, and these are the witnesses of His coming; these the assurances of His favour and goodness, whereby HE gives us the hope, that we, who, we trust, although unworthy, do “duly partake of these holy mysteries, are very members incorporate in the mystical body of the SON OF GOD;” these “the pledges of His love, to our great and endless comfort.”

Such, then being our strife, and such our armour, it remains that we “neither cast away our confidence in GOD, nor place it any where but in GOD,” neither despond because the strife is sharp, nor think to escape without its sharpness. If we are in earnest, we shall find that we have much to do; but we shall find also, on each occasion, strength proportionate to our day; we have to subdue the world around us, by patience and meekness, winning out of it whom we can, by a holy and simple conversation; the world within us we must subdue by watchfulness, prayer, self-denial, repentance, humiliation; we must take heed to what we know, and seek to know more, in order to do it; the world has too much mingled with the Church, and corrupted her, while it borrowed something of her; and so those who would be the true soldiers of the Cross, have much need to look not only to their actions, but to their very maxims of right and wrong, not to their duty only, but to their very standard and measure of duty, lest in what they deem to be overcoming the world, they be really using the world’s standard, not the rules of the Gospel, or Evangelical obedience;—lest they substitute the traditions of men, human maxims, carnal rules, compromising obedience, earthly duties, for the pattern of their MASTER and only SAVIOUR, Who died for us, that we might live to HIM.

We may not be weary of saying, nor you of hearing, that escaping as the Church is out of a relaxed and debased age, they who in earnest seek a heavenly crown, have need oftentimes to review their whole standard; lest what they deem lawful pleasures draw them down and rivet them on the things of sense, or allowed gains be an idolizing of mammon, or getting on in the world be a love of the world which shall shut out the love of the FATHER, or their peace with the world be that friendship with it, which is “enmity with GOD.” We are surrounded on all sides with perilous things and heed them not, and forget them to be dangerous. We have wealth, and forget our LORD’S warnings on its perils; we have the worst sort of wealth, won by continual gaining, and fear not lest it should steal away our hearts; we are a luxurious people, and fear not lest we have learnt the “lust of the flesh and the lust of the eye,” and unlearnt the Cross; we have been boasting ourselves, and fear not the “pride of life;” we “heap up riches,” and fear not lest “the rust of them shall be a witness against us, and eat up our flesh as it were fire;” we lay up treasure here, and fear not lest we should have none hereafter; we are pillowed up by our comforts which we multiply around us, while we forget the poor, and fear not lest HE should disown us as His disciples, Who when on earth was poor, and an hungered, and homeless, and “had not where to lay His head,” and is so now in His poor and sick

members, whom we in our affluence neglect; we have all the things of the world, and forget that “all that is in the world,—is not *of* the FATHER, but is *of* the world;” we are rich, and full, and laugh, and are wise in our own sight, and forget that on these is pronounced woe, and blessing on them who are poor, and hunger, and weep, and are as fools. Alas, compared with elder Christians, even the self-denying, for the most part, will find reason to be ashamed of their self-indulgence; the charitable, of their penuriousness; the simple, of their luxury; they who pray, of the infrequency of their devotions; the peaceable, of their censoriousness; the patient, of their impatience of slight or wrong or injuries, or even of GOD’S fatherly hand in privation and bereavement. Where is now the Gospel dread of “speaking evil of dignities?” the Gospel love which speaketh no ill of its neighbour? Where the Gospel rule of “giving the cheek to the smiter?” Where our LORD’S rule that “men ought always to pray and not to faint?” Where the Gospel measure of self-denying, self-sacrificing charity? Alas, what shallow maxims of the world have we allowed to creep around us, as though the accumulating money were the source-of prosperity, or the employment of artizans in ministering to luxury and ease were the same in GOD’S sight as foregoing ease and comfort, (if it may be) to show mercy on His poor; or as though our fictitious self-made station were to be upheld at the expense of charity, in His sight, Who forsook His glory with the FATHER, for our sakes to become poor; or as though we might lawfully employ the services of man, like those of the beasts that perish, careless of the souls of those who minister to our comforts or our necessities. Alas, even of those who are in earnest, how few even propose it as an object to themselves, to give rather than to increase our substance, to cut off warily all needless occasion of expenditure, that they may give to their LORD in His sick; to make CHRIST co-heir with their children, whose co-heirs they hope their children, with themselves, may hereafter be.

Much then is to be done every way, much to raise our whole standard, much more to raise ourselves to our standard, and act consistently upon it, and persevere in it; to guard alike against the wiles of Satan and the false maxims of the world, and the frailty of our own hearts; to keep alike the stedfastness of our practice and the rigidness of our faith, while the rules of both around us are carnal and lax.

But though much is to be done, none need faint. Whoso cometh unto HIM, HE will in no wise cast out; HE Who putteth into the heart the first faint longing to overcome the world will mature it into ardent desire and effectual striving; HE Who hath appointed thee thy task willeth thy salvation, which HE hath died to purchase. He will proportion it to thy strength, and His strength to the burthen which He lays upon thee. HE will “strengthen the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees,” and “make straight paths for thy feet,” and gently lead thee by the way, and is HIMSELF the way. HE who led not His people, when fresh from the bondage of Egypt, by the straight way, lest they should “repent when they saw war, and return to Egypt,” will bring thee into no greater conflicts than HE sees to be fitted for thee. Look not then onward at the length of the way, or the weariness of the conflict, or the hardness of the strife which thou mayest have hereafter,

or the difficulty of perseverance. It is this looking onward along the earth, and the things of earth, which makes a short way seem so long. Heaven, though far off, looks nearer to us than the horizon which bounds our view on earth. Look then up thither to HIM Who dwelleth there, and to thy own next step thitherward, the next duty which GOD giveth thee to do. HE Who fashioned thy “limbs day by day, when as yet there were none of them,” will form, day by day, the rude and imperfect substance of thy soul. HE Who hath cared for thy body amid weakness and helplessness will provide for thy soul also. HE Who worketh as He wills, and maketh the seed grow thou knowest not how, and seest not, will, thou knowest not how, ripen the seed which HE hath sown in thy heart, and leaven thee by the secret workings of His good SPIRIT. Thou mayest not see the change in thyself, but HE will gradually change thee, and make thee another man. Only yield thyself to His moulding hand, as clay to the potter, having no wishes of thy own, but seeking in sincerity, however faint, to have His will fulfilled in thee, and HE will teach thee what to pray for, and give thee what HE teacheth thee. HE will retrace His own image on thee line by line, effacing by His grace and gracious discipline the marks and spots of sin which have defaced it, until, having stamped anew upon thee, by the gradual transforming power of His SPIRIT, that likeness in which HE created and recreated thee, at the awful day, HE shall recognize the work of His own hands, and have mercy upon it; and thou who hast sought to bear His likeness here, shalt for ever bear the image of the Heavenly; thou who hast sought, though faintly and amid manifold infirmities, to live to GOD here, shalt live with HIM for ever, singing praises to HIM Who out of nothing created thee; when worse than nothing, redeemed thee; took thee out of the world by thy Baptism; when falling back to the nothingness and deadness of the world, renewed thee, softened thee by His tender mercy, waited patiently for thee to turn to HIM, purged away thy dross by the sufferings HE mercifully laid upon thee, plucked thee as a brand out of the flames wherein this lost world shall be burned up, that being “not of the world, even as HE is not of the world,” thou mightest not have thy portion with the world, but with HIM Who overcame it for thee, and will overcome it in thee.