

Plain Sermons by Contributors to 'Tracts for the Times'
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SERMON XCI.
THE VALUE AND SACREDNESS OF SUFFERING.
(PREACHED ON THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS.)

LUKE ii. 21.

“And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the Child, His name was called JESUS.”

THE year, it has been said,¹ begins with our LORD, and our LORD with suffering. The very entrance on our new year is consecrated with the memory of His entrance upon His sufferings: as though to check the thoughtless exultation with which people enter upon new periods of existence, and to set before us the truest and really healthful character of our life below. This year, as our weekly fast was changed into joy and a feast by the Birth of our LORD, so the feast of His Circumcision was, with those who acted upon the rules of our Church, in its turn, changed into a fast; and they had the privilege of being, in their little measure, by bodily discomfort, placed in harmony with the sufferings which they commemorated. To-day, in that that Epistle and Gospel are again used, is a continuation of that solemnity; and so it invites us in a way to think on the value and uses of suffering which His meritorious Suffering purifies and consecrates. For the circumcision was an earnest from very infancy that His whole life should be one of humiliation and suffering; it had its own peculiar suffering and humiliation; for in His Cross “HE was numbered among transgressors” by wicked men; in His Circumcision HE, Who was without sin, deigned to offer HIMSELF as a sinner, in that HE took on HIM the mark of sin.

The value of suffering is evidenced even by its universality. It is impressed alike on the kingdoms of nature and of grace; on the creature which, for our sake, “was made subject to vanity,” and upon ourselves. It is pictured even in the inanimate creation: all nature seems to mourn in the yearly decay of winter, or in the frequent drought of summer. Holy Scripture itself often speaks of it as sharing, though how we know not, in man’s chastisements:—”the ground was cursed for man’s sake:” the prophets tell how “the land mourneth,” “the earth mourneth and languisheth; the world languisheth and fadeth away; Bashan, Carmel, the vine, the oil, the fig-tree, languisheth; yea, it tells how, “being desolate,” the land “mourneth unto God.” Doubtless, these sayings are in part intended to convey spiritual truths also; and the vine and the oil are also the nourishment of GOD’S Sacraments and the influences of His SPIRIT, which are grieved away and dried up to the impenitent. Still GOD’S word confirms our natural impressions on the sight of

¹ “The year begins with THEE, And THOU begin’st with woe.” CHRISTIAN YEAR. The Circumcision of CHRIST.

nature, and tells us that, whatever this may mean, it shares in the sentence upon our sin, and does mourn.² And if inanimate, how much more animate! “The lions,” Scripture says, “do lack and suffer hunger:” our very daily sustenance is obtained by their suffering; they suffer through each other; they suffer through us, even when we would spare them what suffering we can; nay, their suffering seems often brought before us for no end (which we can see), except to impress on us this law of suffering; we bruise them as we walk; the lights we use are sources of painful death to them; not to speak of their sufferings from inhumanity or very wantonness.

And for ourselves, we are all born through suffering; we die mostly through suffering: it is a common way of speaking of death, that it was ‘a happy release’ from suffering. To witness suffering which people cannot relieve, is often the greatest sorrow of attending on a dying bed; and they are so worn out, body and mind, with suffering, that they are often ready to part with those they cherished more than life, even before their time. And it is quite common to speak of the departure of persons loved after protracted illness as if it must be a relief even to those who loved them. Survivors express pleasure at the tranquil departure of those they love, as though this were an unexpected, especial mercy.

Life itself is full of suffering, which we cannot explain. Infants suffer before they can understand their suffering, or seek its removal, or know HIM, Whose they have been made, or can consciously apply to HIM for aid. Half of our race is cut oil’ by these untimely sufferings, whose end we cannot explain. As we grow up, we suffer often from the mistakes, or infirmities, or unsubdued tempers, or want of sympathy, of those with whom we are brought up, or even of elders: our characters are formed by necessary discipline and suffering. Not many years have passed by, before life itself becomes for itself a weariness to many for very vanity: its strong days are spent in toil and weariness, so that people long for the evening; increased infirmities and sufferings are the heralds of its close: they gather one by one to darken the setting of the sun of this life. In the very order of nature, one season of the year is a period to be endured, a time we are glad to “get through,” as we say. And this with all the means which we collect around us to mitigate or remove discomforts. What, where these appliances are not? If such be the case with those who are housed, warmed, fed, what must be the case with those who are day after day hungry, athirst, in cold and nakedness. What of the countries of our earth less tempered than our favoured isle! Every where the rich are the few, the larger portion are the suffering, the poor; and the rich have ills and sufferings of their own, resulting from their very state of living.

What need one speak beside of those whom we meet every where? How many traces of suffering! the halt, the maimed, those who have endured very acute pain, and parted with limbs to save life; and others are hidden from our sight, who are every where even now suffering the like. This is our ordinary lot; not to take into account the dreadful

² “In wisdom’s ear thy blithest strains, Oh nature, seem to mourn.” CHRISTIAN YEAR, Fourth Sunday after Trinity. “Groans of Nature.”

scourges of ALMIGHTY GOD,—war (from whose worst horrors we, and we almost alone, have been exempted), famine, pestilence, conflagrations, mangling of limbs, and the worse cruelties which man inflicts on man.

I have named only bodily sufferings, yet Scripture says, “The spirit of man can sustain his infirmity, but a wounded spirit who can bear?” And yet all bodily suffering brings mental sufferings to those who witness it; and it is appointed that the departure out of this life, allotted to all, should, in each several case, entail sorrow on many, in different degrees, according to their nearness and love. And of these diseases, that which is the appointed messenger to carry off one-third of our race is one of lingering suffering, and removes them most often just as life seems opening most beautifully, and the heart most yearns over them, and most suffers from their loss. And, in this case, the sorrow falls heaviest upon those who seem least able to bear it, or who, as men would think, least need it, the tenderest or the gentlest: and these are often humanly irremediable; they cast sorrow over a whole life, besides all people’s separate sorrows. And yet these are the least sorrows; for what sorrow is like sorrow for the sin of those we love? And yet how few altogether escape this sorrow! How will a thoughtless union entail a whole life of sorrow and suffering; and even if those bonds which we ourselves form, be “in the LORD,” and so exempt from this sorrow, how few have not had either early friends, brothers, sisters, children, even parents, for whom they have been in fear and sorrow!

Who, again, could explain the distressing mental sufferings of the deranged, whose probation in this life, in extreme cases, would, to mortal sight, seem to be closed, and yet their sufferings often seem to exceed all others, day after day, year after year, unceasing, unrelieved, hopeless?

I have not, in all this, spoken of the bitter agony, which is man’s happiest portion, when he has grievously sinned. I have mentioned only sufferings which we see on the very face of things; and of these only a few instances, which may serve to recall other sufferings which most of you have in some case witnessed. And each such worst case which you have seen is but an instance of thousands of thousands of others going on continually, every where on this vast globe, in mind, body, and estate. Every moment, it has been noticed, must one of the vast family of mankind be passing out of life; every moment witnesses somewhere the parting sufferings, and the sorrows of the bereaved, the orphan, or the widow. These are universal sufferings, coming by turn, one by one, over the hundreds of millions of our race. But, distinct from these, how many cases of intense individual suffering must each of us have known, if selfishness hindered us not from realizing them, wearing out mind and body, or quenching in early youth each ray of earthly joy, or stunning, bewildering, agonizing, irremediable, unalleviated, save by endurance and trust in GOD! And each adapted to the several case of each, and that which each would most feel, chosen for each by the unerring Physician of our souls. And yet each case of in-tensest suffering which any of us may witness, is at most but one single unit of what is multiplied over the whole earth, one groan of that voice of universal woe, whose heaviest sounds reach His ear alone, Who hears the heart. Such has been the

history of mankind since the Fall; such is to be its even course of suffering to the end.

So solemnly does the voice of nature prepare us for the teaching of Holy Scripture of the necessity of suffering; so important a place must suffering occupy in the Divine dealings, since it is so allotted to all, and so largely. Suffering is the law of our existence. "Man is born to trouble," says Holy Scripture, "as the sparks fly upwards;" i. e. man's suffering is a law as uniform, as unchangeable, as the laws which GOD has placed upon the physical creation, by which "sparks fly upwards," and so are extinct.

Nature could but mourn over her own sufferings endlessly. She bears witness to the fact, that "man is but of a few days, and full of trouble;" but she cannot lift the veil, or tell the ends of her sufferings, what they are to end in, what end to answer.

Yet her witness may teach us to be still, not seeking to escape them; for how shall we escape what is allotted to all, or why shall we seek to avoid what, since GOD has appointed it for all, must have some good end? It were but to seek to exempt ourselves from His Almightyness or His Wisdom.

But here, as elsewhere, GOD teaches us the fact by nature, and impresses it upon our outward senses; HE explains it, as far as is needful for us, and points His lesson in His Word. We see and feel that suffering is every where; we are assured that it must have some end, because it is so. Yet, even while explaining its immediate end, Revelation clothes suffering with a yet more mysterious character, and shows that it belongs to us as we are the objects of GOD'S love, that it is allotted most to those whom HE most loves.

The first full promise of His mercy after the fall was victory over him by whom we had been vanquished, through suffering; the bruising of the serpent's head through the bruised heel of the promised Seed. It was not until suffering had thus been spoken of as the means and condition of restoration and triumph, that suffering was pronounced upon us as the sentence of our race. Nay, our very sentence hinted that it was a blessing; it is not said, as in the condemnation of Cain, "Cursed art thou from the earth," but "Cursed is the earth for thy sake;" i. e. not merely, though in part, on man's account, but also strictly "for the sake of man," and for his benefit, was the earth cursed. The thorns and briars which his innocency needed not, were a wholesome discipline to his sin; to "eat bread in the sweat of his brow," has ever since been found not merely a penalty but a mercy.

And as this was the general portion of all mankind, so, as time went on, it was shown to be dealt in its fullest measure to those who were brought most near to GOD; thus pointing out suffering as a condition whereby sinful man shall approach to GOD; as a mark of His love; thus preparing them to look for a suffering REDEEMER. Who more vexed than righteous Noah, during a fruitless preaching of a hundred and twenty years, and the mockery at his hopes; or than the patriarchs, wandering as pilgrims, with no place to set their foot on; or just Lot, or righteous Job, or Joseph, through a dungeon the saviour of his brethren; or Moses, or David, whose "soul" was ever "full of heaviness," and cast out of the presence of his GOD, and who, in all his troubles, was blameless? Even already, under the dispensation of temporal promises, it appeared that troubles were rather the marks of GOD'S people, prosperity of His adversaries. "All the day long have I been

plagued,” says the Psalmist, “and chastened every morning.” “They are not in trouble as men; neither are they plagued like men: therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain.” And, as the coming of the SAVIOUR drew nigh, the sorrows of those who were on His side, who were (in whatever degree) His forerunners and representatives, thickened also. The words, in their fullest sense, spoken of HIM, had some accomplishment in them. Of these, too, was it said in the martyr-Psalm, “For Thy sake are we killed all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter;” then martyrdoms increased; the law, too, had its portion in these faithful witnesses to the truth, who “resisted unto blood,” though that Blood, through which theirs was accepted, was not yet shed. The prophets drank of His cup Whom they foretold; they suffered in life as in death; they, too, were “signs to many in Israel,” which, for a ministry sometimes as long as man’s full life, were “spoken against:” “all the people doth curse me.” In life “they wandered about in sheepskins and goat-skins, destitute, afflicted, tormented, in deserts, and mountains, and dens, and caves of the earth”—emblems of HIM Who “had not where to lay His head;” they had (with HIM) “trials of mockings and scourgings: “in death “they were stoned, were sawn asunder, were slain with the sword, were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection;” even as the prize which St. Paul followed after, was “to know CHRIST, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.”

These were but shadows. Human suffering, before or after, even for CHRIST’S sake, is, of course, but a mere reflection of those sufferings through which alone they become other than the penalty due to man’s sin. In HIM, Who was “the Well-beloved SON, in Whom the FATHER was well-pleased,” yet the “Man of sorrows,” are revealed to us their dignity, their greatness, their essentialness, in the economy of man’s redemption.

Vicarious death alone sufficed not, without a life of suffering. That precious Blood-shedding was our ransom; yet was it fitting that the bitter sufferings of the Cross should but gather into one the sufferings of a whole life. In every condition HE hallowed humility and suffering. Our Creed joins the first and the last, and, of His whole life on earth, rehearses but sufferings, “Born of the Virgin Mary “(as, at this time, in a manger, in a cave, amid rude oxen, and yet ruder men), “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried;” every word, of humiliation or suffering. The Creed springs at once from the humiliation of His Birth to His sufferings on the Cross. The sufferings of our late festival had in them something atoning, since then was the name of SAVIOUR given HIM: when “the days were accomplished for the circumcising of the Child, His name was called JESUS.” HE suffered in doing good, as in receiving evil. Words, which speak most of His vicarious sufferings on the cross, “HE hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows,” were also fulfilled (the HOLY GHOST teacheth) in His casting out devils and healing the sick; HE sighed in healing the blind; HE groaned in HIMSELF as HE went to restore Lazarus to life. And if HE had grief in the cures which HE wrought when men believed on HIM, what when they believed not? what when they ascribed His

miracles to Beelzebub, and gave out that HE was in league with the powers of darkness against His heavenly FATHER? If HE were so moved at the weakness of faith in His own disciples, when they could not cast out a devil, that HE uttered the sorrowful words, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? “what must have been the contradiction of sinners against His holiness? what that which St. John relates so sorrowfully,—“The light shined in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not; HE was in the world, and the world knew HIM not,” its Maker; ‘HE came unto His own, and His own received HIM not? “What that His love sought to communicate itself, but could find no entrance in an unloving world? the light shone, but found no entrance with those who loved darkness; His love was compassed about with hatred; they hated without a cause HIM Who was Love; “they have,” HE saith, “both seen and hated both ME and My FATHER?” What to have endured the continual presence of him, whom, in warning, HE called a “devil?” Alas! how should we, who have so little love, know the sorrows of His Love? we, who have so little holiness, the griefs of witnessing unholiness? we, to whom at best, sin is but a slight burthen, (since it weighs us not down altogether,) the weight of bearing the iniquities of the whole world? we who know so little the love of the FATHER, what it was to HIM to bear, instead, His wrath? we, who so little feel the Presence of the FATHER, what it was to HIM to have the Presence of the FATHER, Who in His fulness dwelt in HIM, withdrawn, and HIMSELF forsaken? All these, and whatever else we can conceive to aggravate His sorrows, have their end only in this, to teach us that of His sorrow we know nothing, that it was different in kind as in degree from ours, infinite and upborne by His Infinity, and heightened by His infinite Love which bare it.

And as HE drank the whole Cup of sorrow, so did HE impart it to those who were brought near to HIM. As an infant, HE consecrated through suffering the infants of Bethlehem, and made them “holy Innocents; “when His parents sought HIM sorrowing, HE seems to have taught them that they must needs be disappointed, if they thought to find in HIM joy as from their child; to His only near earthly relation, His Mother, it was prophesied as a blessing that she should share His sorrows; as HE was “a sign which should be spoken against,” so to her it is said, “the sword shall pierce through thine own sold also.” The condition of a near approach to HIM in His kingdom was to drink of His Cup and be baptized with His Baptism: His disciples were to be hated of the world, even as HE was hated, and, for His Name’s sake, to be persecuted, because HE was persecuted. “Endurance “was the sign of an Apostle; to “bear the Cross after” HIM, the terms of being a disciple; “much tribulation,” the sea through which Christians were to “enter the kingdom of heaven;” suffering “in the body “the marks of the LORD JESUS, the badge of His soldiers; “bearing about in the body the dying of the LORD JESUS,” the source of the manifestation of His life in them.

Such then being the testimony given to the value and necessity of suffering in nature and in grace, in the perfecting of the Human Nature of the SON, which was without sin, in the purifying of us sinners, in “making perfect the Captain of our salvation,” and in

“bringing to glory many sons,” who were loved in HIM; since too it was when “endurance had had its perfect work,” that these sons “became perfect and entire, lacking nothing;” and “hope, which shall not be ashamed, is the descendant of tribulation; tribulation working endurance, and endurance experience, and experience hope;” and the Apostle’s benediction is not that we should be free from suffering, but that “the GOD of all grace, Who hath called us unto His eternal glory in CHRIST JESUS, after ye have suffered for a while, stablish, strengthen, settle you,”—it behoves us, Brethren, to treat suffering, whether in ourselves or others, in a much more solemn way than the generality even of serious Christians are wont to do. In itself, it were a punishment for sin, oppressive, hopeless; through His mercy in CHRIST, it is His healing medicine, to burn out our wounds and purify us for His Presence. All are tokens of His Presence, the great Physician of our souls, looking graciously upon our spots and sores, checking our diseases ere they take deep root, or cutting deeply and healthfully into our very souls, if HE have compassion upon us, when we have deeply offended HIM. All, from the most passing pain of the body to the most deep-seated anguish of the soul are messengers from HIM; some spread over life to temper our enjoyments, lest we seek our joys here; some following closely upon what is wrong (as discomfort upon excess); some gradually thickening upon us, if we neglect the first warnings; some coming suddenly on an instant, to startle people out of their lethargy and careless ways, and show them that the life which they are wasting is an earnest thing; some in the natural order of His Providence, as the loss of parents, some contrary to what seems that order, as that of children; some, a new thing, as when HE makes our sun to go down while it is yet day; some, it seems, the immediate preparation for His Holy Presence; whence, perhaps, old age is so generally a period of suffering, and the last illness has mostly so much of heavy suffering; yet all, if we will regard it, His Fatherly care, tempering our cup with pain and sorrow, as HE sees most needful for us: all, in their degree, loosening our hold of this life (as all pain is an earnest and preparation for our final dissolution); all leading up thitherward, where there shall be no pain; all humbling us, as being creatures who require it, and deserve far more; all teaching us to look into ourselves, to see for what disease in us this medicine has been sent.

All, then, pain, sickness, weariness, distress, languor, agony of mind or body, whether in ourselves or others, is to be treated reverently, seeing in it our Maker’s Hand passing over us, fashioning, by suffering, the imperfect or decayed substance of our souls. In itself, it were the earnest of Hell; through His mercy in CHRIST, it is a purifying for Heaven. Either way, it is a very solemn act; it is the Cross changed from the instrument of shame, the torture of malefactors, into the source of life; it is His Cross, applied to us, not as once in Holy Baptism, a painless remedy, but “washing away our filth by the Spirit of judgment, and the Spirit of burning.”

We must, then, treat it reverently, as in His Presence, Who is causing it; not forming any rash judgment as to those who suffer, as though they “were sinners more than others; “it may be that they are saints more than others; and therefore GOD is

“purging them that they may bring forth more fruit,” and burning away the remains of corruption from them; any how it is a token that GOD has not forsaken them, but is still striving with them, and slaying them, if so it be, that they may live to Him. We may not then turn away from suffering in others, we may not mitigate it in, ourselves, thoughtlessly; it is a form of GOD’S Countenance, and, so whatever we do, must be done as a religious act, with religious prudence. Even in those sad cases in the streets, in which it may become our duty to withhold our aid, both because giving would be rather an occasion of sin, and that we may have more for those who really need it, we ought not to “pass by, on the other side,” unconcerned or impatient at their importunity. Even when we must say with the Apostle, “Silver and gold have I none,” we should with the Apostle bestow what we have, our prayers. Still less may we turn away from what is loathsome, or offensive, or shocking, or disgusting, in human disease and misery, even though produced by previous sin: Lazarus was “full of sores,” just ere the Angels carried him into Abraham’s bosom; each sore may be an earnest of his SAVIOUR’S mercy, a touch from His healing hand, by which, HE is saying to him, “I will, be thou clean.” If it were possible, it were better not even to relieve suffering, without sharing it; “sympathy,” “compassion,” are not (what they are too often used for,) a simple, careless desire to remove the misery of others, while shrinking delicately and sensitively from any actual contact with it; but they are, as the very name implies, a “suffering with” those who suffer, a sharing their sufferings, a “weeping with those who weep;” a suffering with them, as being also members of the one body of CHRIST; “remembering them that are in bonds as bound with them,” as CHRIST also not simply relieved our miseries, but “suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow His steps.” It were the highest lot to be able to give up ourselves to minister to the necessities of others, by ourselves sharing them, ourselves enduring fatigue, watchfulness, irksome, revolting offices, in order to minister to our LORD in His sick; “I was sick, and ye visited ME.” But short of this, and where this is not allowed us, and we cannot without injury to other duties more immediate to us, bestow our time and labour for the most part directly upon mitigating the sufferings of the poor, we should still strive to gain a share in our SAVIOUR’S blessing by self-sacrifice; mere bodily relief, bestowed out of superfluities through the ministry of others, without the pains of searching out the objects, and involving no cost, may be accepted by GOD as better than nothing, but it is not Christian Charity. And this is one indirect benefit of fasting, that it makes the rich in one way partakers of the sufferings of the poor; teaches them sympathy, in that they suffer with them and for them, (that they may give in alms what they save by fasting,) and tends to give them, it is to be hoped, a distaste for luxuries at other times, as inconsistent with the humiliation of fasting, or with the wish, by self-denial, to have mercy upon the poor. But bodily relief is one part only of Christian alms-giving; its end is not the relief only of suffering, but that, as St. Paul tells us, “the administration of this service” may “not only supply the wants of the saints, but be abundant also by many thanksgivings unto GOD:” bodily wants are not only to be relieved in a general way, but, as much as may be, to be

turned to the good of the soul of the receiver, by some word in season, of advice or admonition, wherewith one Christian may, without invading the office of the minister, benefit the souls of others; and this is again a reason, why the relief of the poor should be as special as may be, ministered not through the broad, rough, wholesale, way of societies, but even if societies are advisable, applied, as much, as may be, by individuals to individuals, Christian to Christian, in the Name of CHRIST.

And if this reverence and wariness is due in ministering to the wants of the body, how much more in the distresses of the soul, where GOD'S hand is more visible in its chastenings! And here our temptation is, for the most part, the very contrary. The presence of such sorrow comes near to us all, is distressing to us, and so people unconsciously seek to relieve themselves rather than it. It is sad to see the wan cheek and the heavy eye, and so the thoughtless world would fain distract the grief, by calling the mind away from thinking on the subjects of its sorrow, and plunging it anew amid the manifold occupations or nothingnesses of the world. Distract grief! what is this, but to draw the mind away from His Fatherly Hand, Who is tending it, the One Object of our Faith, our Hope, our life, our death, and rend it asunder amid the varieties of things which are passing away? What is it, but—when GOD is separating the soul from the things of this world, and rending from it every thing it loved, except HIMSELF, that, alone with HIM, it may at length turn to HIM,—to encompass it anew with that vain show it loved, wherein it forgot itself, its Author, and its End, to feed it with “the husks which the swine did eat,” and thereby withhold it from returning to its FATHER and its endless home? No! Grief is a very sacred thing, to be ministered to, with a very solemn fear, lest we be interfering with the ends of the Heavenly Physician. Whoso has felt it, knows the truth of that saying, “I kill and I make alive; I wound, and I heal:” human sympathy and human words of comfort float but upon the surface; the wound which GOD has made, is deep, far below, and can be healthfully healed by HIM Alone. Man, unless he direct to GOD, can only do, what GOD pronounces wo upon, “heal the breach” which HE has made, “slightly.” Grief is sad, but the only lasting sadness were its fruitlessness. The true way of administering to grief, is to confess our own inability, and gently, as we may, according to circumstances, to point to its AUTHOR, and its healing efficacy, and its solemn import, and our duties under it; and that, though grievous for the present, yet that “they who sow in tears, bearing good seed, shall reap in joy.” What seems the sterner sort of comfort, in that it confesses the severity of the chastisement, is yet, in that it directs to GOD, the most comforting, as well as the most healthful. It alone has power over grief, because it alone speaks in His Name Who sent it. Still more reverent ought we to be in those yet more awful cases, in which God more evidently “chastens man for sin,” and brings terror upon the sinful soul. We may, indeed, in such cases, hold out GOD'S promises of mercy upon repentance, but, as Scripture also does, in hope only, to be realised more and more by HIM Who Alone can give peace, the GOD of penitents and SAVIOUR of sinners. We may hold up the Cross the sign of salvation; but HE Alone Who bore it, can apply it to the very soul, and bid the returning sinner, “Go in peace.” If it were right to call any system

“soul-destroying,” it would be that which, making present assurance of salvation its end, checks the healthful agony, with which GOD is searching into every defiled recess of the soul, and cleansing it for HIMSELF, and releases it unbidden from its sufferings and its cure.

And for ourselves, to whom we are all disposed to be too tender, gladly avoiding every touch of pain, it were well, while we are allowed to use what may mitigate it when we can, always to bear in mind that every feeling of pain, from slight bodily discomfort to mental misery, is in its degree GOD’S provision, and so not to be eagerly removed as a matter of course, but to be dealt with respectfully. And the best rule, perhaps, might be, to remove it, if either now or in prospect it seem to interfere with the ready performance of other duties; if not, to bear it. Certainly the way in which we, the richer, are wont to fence ourselves against every feeling of cold, or hunger, or pain, and every ruder breath, to lie softly, to remove every slightest discomfort, if we can, the instant it is sent, and diligently to guard each way in which it may approach us, seems, unless health require it, like exempting ourselves from the order of GOD’S Providence, and from a portion of our SAVIOUR’S Cross. The character it tends to form is one sympathising in words rather than in deeds; this delicate self-indulgence cannot truly feel for what it takes such care not to feel. We may well fear lest it injure us more deeply, when we remember warnings like that of the prophet, “Tremble, ye women that are at ease.” It would probably have more to do with the mending our character in many ways, than we think of, were we content to lie hardly, bear incidental pain, or cold, or hunger, or weariness, without seeking at once to relieve it, unless it were for health’s sake, or to return more quickly to other duty.

And when heavier sorrows come, as it is often a privilege to feel ourselves allowed not to stifle them, so is it our wisdom and duty not to distract ourselves from them, nor allow ourselves to be distracted by others’ well-meaning kindness. Every sorrow we meet with is a billow on this world’s troublesome sea, which we must cross upon the Cross, to bear us nearer to our home: we may not then remain where we were; we may not, when GOD’S “waves and storms have gone over us,” be what we were before; we may and must bear our parts in the world’s duties, but—in proportion to its heaviness, and the loudness of GOD’S warning voice in it—not, as we did, in its joys; each trouble is meant to relax the world’s hold over us, and our hold upon the world; each loss to make us seek our gain in Heaven; each bereavement to fix our hearts thither, whither we hope the treasures lent us are removed; each chastisement to deepen our repentance for those sins for which GOD has so chastened us. Sadder far than the sight of any sorrow, is it to see persons, after sorrow, become, in all outward show, what they were before, “recovering their spirits “as it is called; even as the impassive waters are troubled for a while by the stone which severs them, and then become calm and cold as heretofore; sadder far, for it seems like a casting aside GOD’S healing hand, and rising up from under it when HE is laying low.

Rather it is a Christian’s joy, and comfort, and peace, and health, when GOD has laid him low, there to lie—humble, in proportion as GOD has humbled him; to lie low at

the foot of His Cross, trusting that by the virtue of that Cross HE will raise up those who lie willingly where HE has placed them. It is well to be there, where GOD wills; and so, whatever it be, sorrow bringing sin to remembrance, or agony for past sin, or dread of Judgment, it is our wisdom not to vent it in excitement, much less to seek to distract it or waste it, but to take it calmly home to our bosoms and treasure it there, jealously watching lest we lose one drop of its wholesome bitterness; not anxious to escape sorrow, but anxious only not to lose its fruits, anxious only to escape with our lives in our hands, out of that place which the LORD will burn up, and from which, with the loss, it may be, of all, HE is sending His Angel to rescue us.

This has been the experience of all whom GOD has chastened, and who have not disregarded His chastisements. "Before I was troubled," says the Psalmist, "I went wrong, but now have I kept Thy word." "It is good for me, that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes." "I know, O GOD, that Thy judgments are right, and that THOU in faithfulness hast afflicted me." "Blessed is the man," not with whom all things go well, but,—“whom THOU chastenest, O LORD, and teachest him out of Thy law, that Thou mayest give him rest from the days of adversity, until the pit be digged up for the ungodly;” i. e. blessed is he, whom by chastening THOU instructest, that he may escape in the Day of Judgment, and have rest from the pit where is no rest. And the experience of Solomon has been consecrated into a Christian proverb, "Whom the LORD loveth, HE chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom HE receiveth;" "if ye endure chastening," adds the Apostle, "the LORD dealeth with you as with sons;" yea, HE dealeth with us as HE dealt with His Well-Beloved SON, Whom He received, perfected through sufferings, which HE bare for our sins, as HE doth us for our own.

GOD has stamped this very truth upon His own language in the Old Testament; so that "afflicted" and "humble" are denoted by the same word, in that humility is the fruit of affliction; as, on the contrary, the same words signify "rich," "at ease," and "ungodly," in that riches and ease harden the heart: and our LORD hath said, "Blessed are the poor," "Blessed are they that mourn," without confining this blessing to poverty of spirit or mourning for sins, teaching us that poverty and sorrow are themselves blessings: as HE pronounces, "Woe on the rich" and on "them that laugh," declaring riches and laughter to be in themselves evils, though with GOD it is possible to save the rich, and the poor may destroy themselves. And in our own language "subdued," "chastened," are characters of good; and we acknowledge thereby, that it is good to be "chastened," and to have our proud hearts "subdued." Again it is noticed how that form of misbelief, which denies our Blessed LORD'S atoning mercy, haunts those who are at ease, and have gained to themselves this world's goods, and that prosperous traders are especially exposed to it; as, on the other hand, no one ever heard of a poor afflicted Socinian. "When HE slew them, they sought HIM, and turned them early and enquired after GOD."

And such has been the experience of individual Christians down to our own day. "I would not part with one pang that I have had," said a dying man, who had passed his life in station and ease, after a year of acutest suffering, "no, not for the whole world;"

and another, after being for twenty-four years laid upon a bed of suffering, knew not how to thank GOD for this distinguishing mercy; another, on whom suffering had come in that most dreadful form, of sin in those loved, was found, after his decease, most to have prized those sayings of holy men which spoke of the value of suffering. Many such cases all know; so that one doubts not, that in the song of thanksgiving, which shall be sung before the Throne, one chief theme of praise will be “the great tribulation through” which “they came,” and through which they “washed their robes in the Blood of the Lamb.” Others there have been who, alarmed by the troubles of the good, have dreaded to lose their portion, and have prayed GOD to “enlarge,” if it were good for them, “the sorrows of their heart,” and have been heard, where, had they thought of it, they would have most dreaded it; the Cup they would most have shrunk from was given them to drink, and, stripped of all earthly happiness, they found it health.

Happiest they, who, being faithful from their Baptism, are counted worthy to share in the Baptism of their LORD, and suffer, after His likeness, to perfect themselves, and for His Church or members; yet happy they too, who, purged from their dross through suffering, escape “though as by fire; “unhappy only they, in whom GOD seeing no good, passeth them by, and chasteneth not, or who despise, or murmur under, or would elude, His chastisements.

My Brethren, it is not without meaning that the two Sacraments, whereby we are united unto Christ and have His Life derived into us, are both blended with His Cross; “buried with HIM,” says the Apostle, “by Baptism into Death;” “as often as ye eat this Bread and drink this Cup, ye do show forth the LORD’S Death till HE come;” let us, then, who approach this Holy Table, not come to the celebration of His Death and to receive into ourselves His Life and Love, in an unloving, un-sacrificing spirit, offering only what shall cost us nothing; here we may safely trust our alms, and that liberally, to the distribution of others, because GOD by His Church invites us; and such was ever His appointment and the practice of the Ancient Church. It is sad to see how people show least love, when they come to acknowledge His inestimable Love, to receive “the pledges of His Love, to their great and endless comfort; “and are then most penurious in their charity, when they come nearest to their LORD, Who bade us love our brethren, as HE loved us, with a self-denying, self-sacrificing love. It is sad, how they will trust in their own ways and contrivances, and will not trust in those which GOD has ordered for them in His Church, and give little, because they must give in faith not by sight, not seeing how it will be dispensed.

It is time that when we are thus offering our first-fruits upon GOD’S Altar, in acknowledgment that having been bought by HIM, we, our souls, bodies, spirits, all we are, and all we have are His, and that we would willingly, by an act of our own, consecrate to HIM what is His, this parsimonious way of giving should cease; there is much need; the extent of suffering among the poor of our towns, even where they are most cared for, is such as might well appal any Christian heart, lest it bring the curse of GOD upon our whole people; recent changes have turned the compulsory provision for

the poor into a measure of restriction and police: such is the law of the land, and it is not our business to speak against it; it may be made wholesome: would one could think the change arose in the desire only of correcting misuse of that provision, not to save ourselves at the expense of the poor! Such savings would be a nation's curse. At least, let us free our own souls from them, and whatever we may have more by such means, let us give in alms; it may be right that the law should contract its provision, but only if the Church,—the home, the friend, the Mother of the poor,—expand hers; it may have been so ordered, that what is required of us has been lessened, that we may have the privilege of doing of ourselves what by man is not required; that the deserving poor are no longer to be adequately relieved by forced contributions, in order that the rich, with self-sacrificing liberality, may supply the really needy by a proportionate enlargement of voluntary charity. So may this measure become a blessing to our souls, if we anew freely give to GOD in His poor, what has been put again in our own power, to use or misuse, so spend on the world or lay up with GOD, as we will.

So begin we then this our new year; see how your charities may have more the character of a sacrifice; follow His steps, Who even now made HIMSELF poor, that we might be rich, and by suffering brought us joy, joy unspeakable and full of glory. So when trouble and sorrow come upon you, as they must come upon every son whom GOD receiveth, the prayers of the poor, whom you have benefited, will ascend up for you, and your SAVIOUR, to Whom, when commemorating His All-sufficient Sacrifice, you have willingly sacrificed what is a sacrifice to you, will plead the merits of that His Sacrifice for you, HIMSELF will pour oil and wine into your wounds, gladden you, amid sadness, with the anointing of His HOLY SPIRIT, and cheer your heart with that wine, which is His Blood, detach you by sorrow from things which pass away, and by "joy in tribulation" lead you to HIMSELF? Who is our only-True and Everlasting Joy, the True GOD and Eternal Life, where, with the FATHER and HOLY GHOST, HE liveth and reigneth, ever One GOD, world without end. Amen.