

Passiontide Sermons
By Henry Parry Liddon, D.D., D.C.L., LL.D.
Late Canon and Chancellor of St. Paul's.

London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1891

SERMON XV.
THE ECONOMY OF RELIGIOUS ART.
Preached at St. Paul's on Palm Sunday, April 6, 1873.

St. Matt. xxvi. 8, 9, 10.

But when His disciples saw it, they had indignation, saying, To what purpose is this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for much, and given to the poor. When Jesus understood it, he said unto them, Why trouble ye the woman? for she hath wrought a good work upon Me.

IT was on the Saturday before our Lord's Death that He was anointed at Bethany. He came to Bethany on the Friday evening, that He might spend a quiet Sabbath-day there, before making His entry into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday—that is, today,—and meeting all that was to follow. He rested at the house of Simon, a leper, it is probable, whom He had Himself healed, and possibly, although this is far from certain, related to the family of Lazarus; but whether as the father, or as the husband of Martha, it is impossible to determine. When He came, the love and devotion of those villagers who were His disciples led them to welcome Him with a public entertainment; it is plain from the literal force of the text that He was present in the house of Simon, as a Guest among other guests. There He reclined between the two trophies of His power: on this side was Lazarus, silent, reserved, self-involved, as became one who had passed the portals of the grave, and had seen sights at which the living can only guess; and on that side was Simon, who, by His special grace and mercy, had escaped from the terrible scourge of leprosy. There He reclined; and Martha, no doubt, as in her own home, would have waited on all the guests, but especially on Him: but where was Mary? She was absent when the Feast began; but on a sudden she appears: St. John names her; St. Matthew and St. Mark call her simply “a woman,” that they may concentrate the attention of their readers, not upon who she is, but upon what she does. She enters with a box or vessel, worked in calcareous spar or alabaster, and containing the ointment known to the ancient world as nard, the most celebrated, probably, of ancient scented ointments, and as such alluded to, where we should expect the allusion, in the Song of Solomon. She “broke the box,” says St. Mark; that is, she broke the narrow neck of the vessel, or in some way removed the seal which prevented the perfume from evaporating; and then she poured the contents of the jar or box first upon the Head, and then, St. John tells us, on the Feet, of Jesus. To anoint the head and clothes on festive occasions, however little in keeping with modern manners, was the custom of the ancient world,—Roman, Greek, Egyptian. In the tombs of Egypt there may be seen to this day paintings which represent slaves anointing guests as they arrive at the house of their entertainers; and alabaster jars have been found in these mansions of the dead, retaining traces of the ointment which once had filled

them.

So Naomi desires her daughter-in-law Ruth to anoint herself, by way of getting ready for Boaz; and Solomon bids a man, in his joy of heart, let his garments be always white, and let his head lack no ointment; and when he says further that a good name is better than precious ointment, he says a great deal for a good name, because the use of such ointment was a first requisite of Jewish respectability. There was nothing extraordinary, then, in the mark of respect shown to our Lord by pouring ointment on His Head; but St. John says that Mary anointed the Feet as well as the Head of Jesus. This meant something more intense, more passionate, than an act of conventional welcome; and now that the box was opened, and the scent, as St. John notes, filled the whole house, it was impossible not to be sensible of its delicacy and richness. If the act had been a common act; if the ointment had been common ointment, the incident might have passed without notice; but as it was, there were ill-natured eyes looking on across the table, and unfriendly criticism was at work, and pretty sure to make itself heard.

I.

My brethren, it is to the observations which were made on this act of Mary, and to the way in which our Lord treated the critics, that I wish to direct your attention this afternoon.

1. First of all, what was the criticism? The act of Mary, it was said, was a wasteful act. "To what purpose; is this waste?"—or, as it might be rendered, this destruction?—"for this ointment might have been sold for much, and given to the poor." Or, as St. Mark and St. John report the words: "The ointment might have been sold for three hundred Roman silver pence or more"—the denarius was the current silver coin throughout the Roman Empire—"and given to the poor." The point of the criticism was that there had been an outlay of valuable material for no practical purpose; that there had been a culpable indulgence of mere feeling, mere sentiment, when what there was to give ought to have been given to the cause of human want and human suffering. There was a very poor population at this date in and about Jerusalem, to which the speaker would have been understood to allude. No doubt the criticism was uttered in a sharp, harsh voice, designed to make Mary thoroughly uncomfortable at what she had just been doing, and by provoking our Lord's attention, to get Him, as eminently a friend of the very poor, to condemn her too.

2. Next, who were the critics? St. Mark, for reasons of his own, does not care to name the speakers: some who were there, is all that we learn from him. St. Matthew gives us a nearer view; he tells us that the speakers were disciples: "When His disciples saw it, they had indignation, saying, To what purpose is this waste?" St. John brings us into the very scene itself. Everything of the kind begins with one person, and is taken up by others. And we should probably be less ready to repeat the ill-natured stories which go floating about the world, and growing larger and more malicious as they float on, if we only knew the weak or wicked source from which in many cases they originally spring. Nothing is more infectious than ill-nature; generally speaking, a very few people supply the world with the raw material on which it works.

Who began to criticise the act of Mary? St. John tells us that it was "Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which should betray Him." Judas was the first speaker; the other

disciples, overawed by a clever sneer and a strong will, assented,—they assented, at any rate, by a low murmur of approval, or by their bows, or by a silence which under the circumstances could not be mistaken. Practically, then, whoever spoke or did not speak, the disciples present were all of them, in different degrees, the critics.

3. Thirdly, what was the real motive of the criticism on the act of Mary? Now, as regards Judas, St. John is very explicit: “This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein.” Judas was treasurer of the common fund of alms, out of which our Lord and His immediate followers supported themselves; and St. John, who had every means of knowing the truth, from his intimacy with Jesus, says plainly that Judas was dishonest, and used the common fund for his own purposes. It has been suggested that the common purse was empty at this time, from whatever cause. Judas was anyhow annoyed at what he regarded as the withdrawal of three hundred silver coins from a fund on which he was accustomed to draw for private purposes. But, like other dishonest or sinful people, he felt that it was prudent to affect a respectable motive; so, for the time being, he set up for a large-hearted philanthropist, who had a particular concern for the sufferings of the poor, and it was in this capacity that he led the chorus of complaint at what had been done by Mary, in anointing the Feet and the Head of our Lord Jesus Christ with so very costly an ointment.

The motives of the disciples who agreed with Judas would have been different; there is not the slightest reason for suspecting them of insincerity. They were guilty—if that term may be used—of a want of moral courage, or of an error in judgment. Of a want of moral courage, if, as I suggested, Judas overawed them by the sheer force of bitter and noisy vehemence, and they agreed with him, in order to avoid a disturbance, just as easy good-natured people, who have not yet got any very firm hold on principle, will always do under such circumstances. Of an error in judgment, if, not yet knowing the real character of Judas, and thinking that there was something in what he said, after all, which deserved attention, they begged, with respectful deference, that an act of too lavish expenditure might be disowned by their Master, and the person responsible for it rebuked.

They probably were entirely persuaded that to pour this very costly preparation upon His Head, and even upon his Feet, was to be guilty of an unpardonable extravagance. It might have been turned into bread for the starving poor; and when they said so they thought, no doubt, that they were saying what He, their Master, under ordinary circumstances, might be expected to say Himself. Was He not notoriously the friend, the associate, the champion of the poor? Was He not the enemy and the denouncer of selfish luxury, of subtle self-pleasing, of the sacrifice of duty to sentiment, of the sacrifice of moral obligations to social or religious or conventional form? Whatever led Him to be silent now they at least would speak out, in the firm belief that their view was a sensible one. Criticism of this kind is very plausible; it may seem at first sight irresistible, but it is false.

It was set aside very summarily indeed by Jesus, when they appealed to Him to sanction it. He did not balance between Mary and her critics; He did not admit that there was something in what they said, and that Mary’s zeal had outrun her discretion. He placed Himself between her and the disciples; His first care is to make her cause utterly His own. He is wounded in the wounded Mary. He is troubled in her perplexity. “Why trouble ye the woman? she hath wrought a good work on Me.” He will not make any

admission in favour of her judges, while He acknowledges her act in terms which He never applied to any other human action during the days of His flesh. If her act was not wrong, it would at least have appeared to Mary's critics to be insignificant; but Jesus has deigned to confer on it an immortality of glory, unlike any other mentioned in the Gospels—an immortality for which statesmen and warriors and authors have sighed in vain. "Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this Gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, there shall also this deed, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her."

II.

Why does our Lord speak of Mary's act in terms like these? He Himself tells us: "She hath wrought a good work on Me." Why, we again ask, was the work good? He tells us that it was good for two reasons.

i. It was good, first of all, as being a work of faith. The guests at the feast of Bethany, most of them, notwithstanding the recent miracle which had summoned Lazarus from his grave to a seat at that very table, were living as most men live: they were living in the present, without a thought of the future; they were living in the visible, without a thought of the unseen. Mary looked higher than the world of sense; deeper into the future than the passing hour. She knew what Jesus had said about His Personal claims to be before Abraham: One with the Father, and she took Him at His word. She knew that He had foretold His Death, and Burial, and Resurrection; and she took Him at His word. As he sat at that board, eating and talking like every one else, it was not every soul that could set aside what met the eye of sense and discern the reality; not every one who could see that there was that beneath the form of the Prophet of Nazareth which is worthy of the most passionate homage of the soul; not every one who would reflect that ere many days had passed, that very Form would be exposed upon a Cross to the gaze of a brutal multitude, while Life ebbed slowly away amid overwhelming agony and shame. Mary did see this. "In that she poured the ointment on My Body, she did it for My Burial." "My Burial!" How the words must have jarred upon the ears of the company; almost as much as would an allusion to death in a speech at a great City dinner. What an irony there is in the contrast between this solemn allusion and the festive scene around! There they were reclining at the board, rejoicing at the restoration of their friend Lazarus; and lo! the acknowledged Lord of Life, the Kaiser of Lazarus from the grave, is discussing the proprieties of His own Funeral. Well may they have wondered. Mary knew that all was natural and in order. "My Burial!" Does Jesus read into the act of Mary a deeper meaning than she had made plain to herself, or is he assisting her to recognise her motives, her real motives, indistinctly realised though fully acted on? Probably the latter is the true account. If in the Judgment Hall and on the Cross the Messiah was to be before the eyes of men as a worm, and no man, a scorn of men, and the outcast of the people, He was, Isaiah had foretold, to be with the rich in His Death. Nothing that earth could yield would be too precious to anoint, after the manner of the ancient world, that Sacred, that Loved Body of Jesus; and if Mary could not be near Him then, she would anticipate the dreadful moment while yet she might; she would see in Him, though He was still among His friends, the dying Crucified, and she would lavish on Him her very best. "In that she hath poured this ointment on My Body, she did it for My Burial."

2. Mary's act was good, our Lord says, for a second reason. It made the most of an opportunity which would not recur. The disciples, following the lead of Judas, pleaded the claims—the sacred claims—of the poor against the act of Mary. Our Lord glanced at the promise in Deuteronomy that the poor should not perish out of the land: "Ye have the poor always with you." Certainly He does not deny their claim,—He Who had said to the rich young man, "Sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come, follow Me,"—He Who on His Judgment-Throne makes deeds of mercy done to the poor deeds done to Himself—forgetfulness of the poor forgetfulness of Himself. But He does say, "Do not plead a duty which is always pressing, and which can always be discharged, against the claims of an extraordinary demand upon faith and love." "Ye have the poor always with you, but Me ye have not always." Once only would Jesus die; once only could He be prepared by loving hands for Burial; once only would He sit at that feast in Bethany, in that solemn, awful stillness which befitted the near approach of the storm when sin and hate were to do their worst upon Him—that faith and love might claim their rights and prepare for the end. It was Mary's happiness that she knew the preciousness of the moment; that she made the most of it.

3. Our Lord gives no other reasons than these, and they will be sufficient for Christians, as coming from the King of the moral world. But a utilitarian age will still ask a further question: it will ask how an action of this particular form could be thus in itself a good work from a spiritual and religious point of view, could be other than a wasteful expenditure? If Mary had saved her ointment, but had said in her enthusiasm that she believed in the Divinity of Jesus, that she anticipated and was preparing for His approaching Death, would not this have been enough? Might not the same amount of good have been done, and the price of the ointment given to the poor at the same time? Was it not really waste? Waste is, of course, a relative term. Before we know whether a particular action involves waste, we must know what the agent thinks is best worth aiming at. Those who are engaged in great enterprises generally appear wasteful to those who confine themselves to small ones. Those who think only of sensual enjoyment cannot understand the sacrifices which men will make for intellectual objects; they who are happy in a private station cannot enter into the willingness of public men to give time and money for unremunerative objects, as they seem; and in the same way, the worldly cannot understand the proceedings of the earnest believer; and the cold or apathetic in religion have no key to the meaning of loving devotion. Men live in worlds of thought and effort so different, that the life of one is as unintelligible to the mind of another as the proceedings of a bird would be to an observant fish; and this being so, waste is plainly a term which is used by hardly any two people in the same sense. For Mary, Judas's hoard was wasted; just as Judas complained of the waste of Mary's ointment. But was Mary's act really wasteful? When our Lord commended it, was He commending a pointless form, involving a lavish outlay? Look closer, and you will see that Mary illustrates a great law of the moral and spiritual world; namely, that truth and goodness are largely promoted among men by indirect means. We see this in God's Providence, in His making a way for religion by the advance of civilisation. Civilisation, as we all know, is not Religion; it is human life organised and embellished in the best way, and with a view to the wellbeing, here in this world, of the greatest number. But civilisation is frequently a pioneer or a fellow-traveller with Religion; civilisation needs Religion for its own purposes in order to get motives strong enough to hold and make good the ground which it has won from

animalised savage life; and Religion, on the other hand, is under obligations to civilisation, to the arts and the knowledge which it brings, and which are all of them helpful to the propagation of the Faith. And thus it happens sometimes, though not always, that the attention of men or of races is won for Religion by the march of civilisation; civilisation is thus, while it seems to exist for its own sake—it is, I say, as it were, in the Hand of Providence, the box of precious ointment which is poured on the Head and the Feet of Jesus. We men are impatient at the process sometimes; we do not see the connection between the two things; we wish Jesus to be honoured and acknowledged without wasting the labour of years, perhaps of centuries, in the slow travail of social reconstructions, or of material and intellectual progress. We do not see why its railroads, and its schools, and its new courts of judicature, and its press, and its inheritance of a new world of ideas, which are European, no doubt, but not religious, should precede the conversion of India to the Faith of Jesus Christ. We think, perhaps, that if we could revise the action of God's providence it would be different; we should not allow this waste of energy upon that which has no traceable connection with the other world. We have not yet learnt the value of indirect witness or indirect services to truth; Mary, with her precious ointment, was really doing the same work as St. Paul preaching on the Areopagus at Athens. But it takes time and thought to see this.

We may see the same law in Education. If you teach a child a truth or a duty directly; if you say, "This is true," "That is right," the child may or may not learn the lesson; it will depend upon his confidence in or love for the teacher, upon his docility of temper, upon his power of being attentive and humble at the same time. But the child is often best taught by an act which only makes him think, which is unintelligible to him, and excites his curiosity, perhaps his indignation, till he has found out the true reason for it. He sees something quite out of the way, and, as he thinks, extravagant; the precious ointment is poured upon the Head of Jesus and upon the Feet of Jesus too, and the child wants to know why. He gets his answer, and the consequence is that he learns his lesson much more surely than if it was taught him in a direct way. For his mind is active and not passive in the process; he goes out to find truth instead of having it pressed on him. His reason, as well as his imagination, is reached, and his memory is tenacious of that which had excited his surprise when first he witnessed it.

The same principle will explain the use which the Church of Christ, ay, and the Bible, have made of art. Art is not religion: it may be profoundly anti-religious or irreligious; but it may also be a missionary and an apostle. Take poetry,—the first and highest of the arts. How much of the Bible is poetry! No poetry that ever was written is more beautiful, as poetry, than Isaiah. Yet Isaiah might have said what he did say much more briefly if he had written out what he had to say in prose, like newspaper paragraphs; and there are no doubt some persons who read him now as they would read an Act of Parliament, and who would rather not have had to get at his meaning through his poetry; who are inclined in their inmost hearts to say of his incomparable majesty and pathos: "To what purpose is this waste of words? This language might have been economised, and the surplus saved might have been devoted to some other useful subject!" And if such advice has not been taken by anticipation, why is it? Why, but because He Who made us knows that, side by side with our sense of truth, we have a sense of beauty; and that our sense of beauty may most persuasively minister to our apprehension of truth.

So, again, with music, and painting, and sculpture. Each of these arts is a natural

handmaid of religion. The Psalms were, many of them, intended to be sung to an instrumental accompaniment by their inspired authors; and the fine arts, as we call them, were profusely lavished under Divine direction upon the Tabernacle and the Temple. It may be said here too—Why this waste? Why could not David have read his Psalms instead of singing them? Why could not Solomon have dispensed with the services of Hiram of Tyre, and the skilled workmen? The same thing has been said from age to age about the music and the temples of the Christian Church. “God,” men have said, “is a Spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.” Most true: but the question is not as to what is of the essence of real accepted worship; the only Master in the school of prayer Who can teach to any purpose is God the Holy Ghost; but the question is, Whether art may not lead the way to the school in which He teaches—whether it is not like the pot of ointment—a witness to the future and the invisible? Certainly, for those who see Christ in His Church, who believe with St. Paul that it is His Body, the fulness of Him That filleth all in all, it is natural, as it was natural to Mary, to bestow on it our costliest and our best. Nay, it appears to me that noble souls, fired with a love of Christ, are at times anxious, like Mary, to bid defiance to the world by doing Him some public and extraordinary homage; there are times when they can no longer contain the love for Him, the Eternal Beauty, which consumes them, and they rejoice to ignore the criticisms of a Judas, or the criticisms of weak-minded disciples whom Judas misleads. They fall down before Him, and break the box which contains their all, and pour it, in their passion, not on His Head merely, but on His Feet as well, out of their love for Him.

The criticism which our Lord rebukes has not died away with the age of the Apostles. The false utilitarianism which keeps the bag, and grudges every penny that does not go into it, constantly asks, “To what purpose is this waste?” How often is the cause of the poor at home pleaded against the cause of Missions!—as if one form of charity did not really help another; as if interest in the spiritual needs of the heathen did not really go hand in hand with interest in the temporal and spiritual needs of the home poor; as if the spirit of charity or the spirit of devotion could be thus divided against itself, and set one object against another in unnatural rivalry.

“To what purpose is this waste?”

It was said to me, not very long ago, that it is morally wrong in us to set about the completion of St. Paul’s, while London, and especially the East End of London, presents to our view such a mass of poverty and misery. “When all the poor have good houses to live in, and plenty to eat; when pauperism has been absorbed into the ranks of honest poverty, and poverty is being really dignified and enriched by well-paid labour,—then, if you like, you may complete your Cathedral. But until then,” the critic will go on saying, “these mosaics—those marbles, that gilding—might have been sold for much more than three hundred pence and given to the poor.” Who can doubt that if the speaker had been at the feast in the house of Simon the Leper at Bethany he would have agreed very energetically with the disciples, and have denounced Mary and her work?

To all such criticisms our Lord’s words are an eternal rebuke. He has condemned once and for ever the cold judgments which a narrow utilitarianism, even though -it may own His Name, would pass upon the generous emotions of devout hearts. Their pure feeling has its language, which is unintelligible to those who do not share it, but which is read in the skies. If we do not enter into the enthusiasms of others, let us fear, at least, to

criticise them: they may be very high above ourselves in the kingdom of grace. If our own service of God is meted out by a rigid rule, if it is incapable of those generous outbursts of love such as was Mary's act at Bethany—this is hardly a cause for self-congratulation. Our own temperament may be a real element in our personal responsibility it can be no safe measure of the acts of others.

III.

Let me conclude with two particular applications.

On Tuesday next, please God, St. Matthew's account of the Passion of Jesus Christ, as set to music a century and a half ago by the German composer, Sebastian Bach, will be rendered in this Cathedral. There are two ways of looking at such an enterprise as this. One is to regard it simply as a musical entertainment, with a certain appropriateness to the time of year and the place, which is offered to the public by the clergy of St. Paul's. I have seen it so described; but if this description were a true one, you would have a right, my brethren, to ask the question with some warmth, To what purpose is this waste? Was it then for this—for the mere promotion of a noble art—that these sacred walls were raised by our forefathers, and that this church is maintained among the living millions of this great Metropolis? Is this an object which would have been owned by the great Apostle whose name we bear—the man who determined to know nothing among his converts save Jesus Christ, and Him Crucified? I trow not. From a religious point of view, art which has no object beyond itself—art which has no ambition higher and nobler than artistic perfection—is waste: it does nothing for man in his deepest relations and capacities; it has no bearing upon the Eternal world. The only way of looking at such an enterprise as ours which is compatible with our duties towards you, my brethren, and towards our Lord and Master, is to treat it, not as a concert, but as a religious service: as an effort, through the ministry of sublime and pathetic music, to bring the successive incidents of our Lord's bitter Passion and Death for us sinners more closely home to our hearts and feelings. If it does that, it will not be waste. If it does that it will earn, not merely the good words of the musical journals, but the acclamations of the Angels in heaven and the approval of our Lord. If it does that, for even a few souls out of the multitude, we shall feel that the box of ointment has not been poured forth in vain.

There are many persons so constituted that for them music means nothing; it is merely a scientific form of noise. There are others who delight in it, but only as art; to whom it suggests nothing beyond itself. Very well, let them stay away: clearly they will not be helped if they come here; a love of music is not necessary to being in a state of grace: they may go to heaven just as well without music as others with it. But let them not judge what they do not understand, after the fashion of narrow disciples, and at the bidding of a Judas, who wishes no good to religion at all. What we want in these days especially is generosity—the generosity which can understand that all characters, all souls., are not framed in one mould; which can bear with a fervour higher and intenser than its own, and proportionately strange in its self-expression; which, in any case, can believe and hope the best when it cannot itself follow.

Lastly, and in any case, with this day begins the most solemn week for serious Christians in the whole course of the year, the week which is consecrated, every day of it, as Good Friday is especially, to the contemplation of our Saviour's Sufferings and Death.

It is a time for being, if possible, much alone; for earnest prayer over and above our usual devotions and the regular Services of the Church; for avoiding all the distractions of pleasure and business that can be avoided; for getting deeper into our own soul, closer to our God, in union with His Suffering Son. There will not be wanting voices around us, whispers in our own hearts to ask the purpose of this waste of strength and time: but, brethren in Christ, heed them not. Nothing is wasted on earth that lays up ever so little in heaven; and if we have any true sense of what is due to our Crucified Lord, we shall open our hearts to the influences of the time—to the strength, the tenderness, the clear-sightedness, the fervour, which come from close contact with the Cross. And I am mistaken if, to some at least, there does not come also the desire to join with Mary in bringing some alabaster-box of ointment of spikenard, very precious, ready for the Redeemer's Burial—some one generous act, done for His dear sake, to His Church or to His poor, done to Him in them, done in forgetfulness of the present, and in the thought and view of the Eternal Future—done in the conviction that He will accept and bless what love for Him can offer, and that His Blessing makes all human judgments a matter of entire indifference.