

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 XVI.
THE LIVING WATER

Preached at the Chapel Royal, Whitehall, on Passion Sunday, March 26, 1871.

St. John. iv. 13, 14, 15.

Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him ft well of wetter Bringing up into everlasting life. The woman saith unto Him, Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw.

THERE is no scene in our Lord's earthly Life in which it is easier to bring Him vividly before our eyes than that which gave occasion to these words. He was walking from Judæa along the great road through Samaria; and in the middle of the late autumn day, weary with His journey, He sat down—the language exactly expresses His attitude—resting on the edge of, and so leaning over, a well, at the mouth of the valley which led up to the ancient city of Shechem. The well is there now at this very hour, recognised as beyond dispute by the most sceptical of travellers as the well of Jacob, the well of the conversation in St. John's Gospel. It is just 9 feet in diameter, and 105 feet in depth, and in the spring-time there is commonly about 15 feet of water in it. This well had a history: it was a relic of the age of the Patriarchs. It had been dug by Jacob, partly to mark his possession of the spot, just as in Southern regions of Palestine Abraham had dug, and Isaac had cleared and repaired similar wells, partly as a sheer necessity for great cattle-owners, as were the ancestors of the race of Israel, tending their flocks and herds under an Eastern sun. The Samaritans loved and revered this particular well; believing themselves, not very accurately, to be the children of Jacob and Joseph (they were really converted heathens with Gentile blood in their veins), they looked on this well as a connecting link with their presumptive ancestors. As the disciples left their Master sitting on the well's brink, and wended their way up the narrow valley towards the city in which they were to buy provisions for their remaining journey, down the same valley there came a Samaritan woman, veiled, and with a pitcher, to draw water; just as Rebekah, as Rachel, as Zipporah had drawn it elsewhere in the ages before her. She came, and the Stranger asked her to give Him a little water to drink; and she, marking the dialect or accent of His speech, and knowing how, for more than four long centuries, a fierce religious feud had separated the Jews from the Samaritans, expressed her surprise that He should claim at her hands a token of neighbourly, almost—for so the Easterns deemed it—of religious communion. Our Lord does not answer her question: He had come on earth not to argue but to teach. He answers not the inquiry which fell upon His human sense of hearing, but the deep

unexpressed yearnings of the soul of the speaker, which He could read, when not a word was uttered, in all its hidden misery. "If thou knewest the gift of God, and Who it is that saith to thee, Give Me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water." She knew of no living water but that which lay just 90 feet beneath them, at the bottom of the ancient well of Jacob. She could not understand how the Stranger who had "nothing to draw with" could promise her the clear spring water out of that well. And if He was thinking of another well, with living Water in it, purer and more refreshing than this, was He claiming to be greater than the patriarch of the race,— "Our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle"? Again Jesus speaks,—in answer not directly to her spoken question but to the questions of her inmost soul,— "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again, but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." What the Speaker exactly meant the woman of Samaria can only have vaguely apprehended. But she felt at least that He was speaking of some water with properties far more exhilarating and precious than any of which she knew. She knew that she, for many weary years, had toiled down to that well of Jacob, and back to the city, day by day, with a laggard step, and with a heavy heart; and it seemed to her as if she might somehow be relieved from her thankless toil, from her aching sense of misery: "Sir," she cried eagerly, "give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw."

I.

It will do us good, my brethren, if God gives us His Blessing, to ask what was this water of which Jesus spoke, and of which the poor woman so earnestly desired to drink. We Christians, of course, look at our Lord's earlier Words in the light of His later Revelations; and we are not reading into them meanings which they will not bear because we ascribe to Him, and to those whom He commissioned to speak for Him, a consistency of language which warrants us in interpreting one utterance by another,—the earlier by the later, the scanty intimation by the explicit assertion.

i. Observe, first of all, the nature of this gift of which Christ speaks. Our Lord calls it a "well of water"—and "living water." This expression had already an ascertained sense in the Hebrew Scriptures: it meant pure water ceaselessly rising from a spring, as opposed to still or stagnant water. Such was the water—it is the same expression—which Isaac's servants found when they digged again the old wells which the Philistines had stopped in the valley of Gerar: such was the water over which, according to the Jewish Ritual for the cleansing of the leper, one of the offered birds was to be killed in an earthen vessel. And although the exact expression does not occur, the idea of water running from a spring as a source of life and health is prominent in such visions as those of Ezekiel, who beheld an abundant stream pour forth under the Gate of the Temple at Jerusalem, and then flow eastward; or of Joel, who told "how a fountain should come out of the House of the Lord, and should water the valley of Shittim;" or of Isaiah, seeing deeper into the future, and exclaiming to the coming generations, "With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of Salvation." There is much else to the same purpose in the Old Testament; and the banished Apostle in vision gathers up its completed meaning when he tells how the Angel showed him "a pure river of the water of life, clear as crystal,

proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb.”

If the question be asked what it was precisely that our Lord meant by the “living water” here, we have to consider that He, especially in St. John’s Gospel, speaks of Himself as the Life: the Being, that is, Who quickens, upholds, and invigorates movement and growth in the souls of men. As the Life, He is, He says, the Food of men; as the Life, He is also the Resurrection; as the Life, He claims to rescue alike from moral and physical death; “all that are in the graves shall hear His voice;” as the Life, He bids all who would live indeed to come to Him, cling to Him, feed on Him. Doubtless the figure of water is used especially in Holy Scripture as a physical likeness of the cleansing action of the Divine Spirit: but the Spirit of Christ is so termed because it is His work to graft us into Christ’s Human Nature; and Christ Himself is termed by St. Paul a “quickening Spirit,” with reference to His thus becoming an inward gift. Nor in the words “living water” does there seem to be any clear, or at least primary, reference either to Baptism, by which Christ’s Life is originally imparted, or to faith, by which it is received. It is the gift, not the method of its bestowal, which is here in question: and Christ is His own gift, as He is His own message, His own Gospel: He has nothing higher to announce, nothing better to give us, than His Adorable Self. But as we dwell on it, the figure which our Lord employs suggests vividly to us the characteristics of His gift.

2. A well of living water is, in the first place, always fresh. It does not stagnate like rain-water, it does not become brackish or foul; the new supplies which, minute by minute, burst upwards from the soil, keep it pure and clear. So it is with Christ. History is a great storehouse of buried memories, some of which are galvanised into a momentary life by our antiquarians, but which soon die away again from the grasp of memory, since they belong to a past age, and do not answer to our wants or correspond to our sympathies. But eighteen centuries ago One appeared Who spoke words which have the same incisive and trenchant force, the same exquisite and mysterious attraction, as if they were the novelties of yesterday. His several actions and His life as a whole speak to the nineteenth century as they spoke to the first, provoking sharp hostility now as then, but then as now winning their way to sure empire over true hearts. He is, in short, ever fresh and young; and such as He is in history, such is He also within the sanctuary of the heart. In that vast treasure-house of the dead—the human soul,—amid all that is stagnant, all that belongs to the irrevocable past, all that bears on it the marks of advancing change and corruption, amid the thoughts which pall, the memories which depress, the forms of feeling which once quickened within us the highest and most subtle enjoyment, but which have long ceased to move, or which are roused now into a momentary life only to create something like repugnance,—there is, I dare to say it, for Christians one thought which is ever fresh, one memory which is ever welcome and invigorating, one train of feeling which kindles within the soul into a burning tide the keenest and purest passion: it is the thought, the memory, the love of our Lord and Saviour. Just as literary men have said that if they had to choose one book in the world which should furnish them, in the absence of all others, with high interest and enjoyment, and that unfailingly, they would choose the Bible; so within the soul the thought, the memory of the One Perfect Being is the one warrant of a continuous refreshment, because He is more than a thought or a memory—far more; because He is a living Presence. A Well of Water—that is His own figure—He lives within regenerate souls in His perpetual freshness: as He was guaranteed against seeing corruption in the tomb, so much more, now that He has risen, is He proof against

its ravages; the centuries pass, but He renews His youth; life waxes and wanes, but He smiles on its sunset not less refreshingly than on its springtide. “Thou art the same, and Thy years shall not fail,” and With Thee is the Well of Life.”

3. A spring of water is also in continual motion; and herein also Christ is true to His own metaphor. He is in History, He is in the Soul of Man, ever different and yet the same. As the sky presents the same outline of clouds on no two days on which we observe it, and yet is the same sky; as the sea, visit it as often as we will, never looks quite as it looked before, yet is ever the same; as the smallest jet of water, whose volume never varies, yet presents us minute by minute with an infinite variety of forms; so is it in the world of spirits with the Presence of Christ. He is movement, and yet identity. He is to us what He was to our forefathers; yet He is ever displaying new aspects of His Power and His Perfections to those who hold communion with Him. He is at one and the same time Stability and Progress: here preserving the unalterable lines of His One Perfect Revelation of Himself, there leading us on to new and enriched perceptions of its range and its significance.

As He is Himself movement, so He is the Source of movement. He has set the soul of man in motion, and kept it moving. He has quickened the very intelligence which would fain drive Him from His throne. For the truths which He has brought to us have moved the soul of man to its depths—moved it so profoundly, that whether men accept these truths or not, they cannot rest as though they had not heard them. As it is said in the Gospel of His last entry into Jerusalem, that when He had entered “all the city was moved,” so is it with His entrance into the soul. Faculties which had been dormant for years are stirred to meet Him, and He keeps them in motion, because He Himself is perpetually exhibiting new aspects of His Power or His Beauty. It is said sometimes of the Christian Creed that it ensures the stagnation of honest thought. Undoubtedly in one sense it does arrest thought; it gives a fixed form to our ideas on subjects of the highest importance; it fixes them thus in the Name and with the Authority of the All-Wise. We Christians are not now discussing the Divine Attributes or the destiny of man as if these were matters upon which the light of certainty had never been thrown; but fixed thought is not the antagonist of active thought, any more than the wall or rim of the well is hostile to the movement of the water which springs up within. Those who have had anything to do with education must know how often a naturally stupid and dull person has been quickened into intelligence, at least on one set of subjects, by learning to take a deep practical interest in religion. The vast ideas which the Christian Creed contains, when once they are living realities to the soul, move it to its very depths—God, Eternity, the past, with the account to be given of it, the future, with its mighty hopes and fears, Christ’s love in Redemption—these things cannot become more than words to any and leave the soul unmoved.

4. And thus a well of springing water fertilises. All around the edge the green verdure tells the story of its life-imparting power. And here too Christ is the great fertiliser of the soul of man. He has made human thought capable of productions which could not else have been produced. Dante and Shakespeare are in their different ways distinctly His creations. He has fertilised affection: family life, as we understand it in Europe, is His work: His Authority is reflected in the Christian Father, His Tenderness in the Christian Mother, His lowly Obedience in the Christian Child. Above all, He has fertilised Will; He has made it capable of new measures of self-sacrifice; of heroism and

self-sacrifice, prosaic and unnoticed more often than conspicuous; heroism and self-sacrifice which, but for Him, would never have existed.

Ah! if by any national infatuation in the years to come, we should try to do without Him, we should soon discover even in the matters of this life the magnitude of our mistake. When human thought has nothing upon which it can seriously fix itself beyond the province of sense; when human affection is forbidden to spend itself on any form that is not earthly, palpable, material; when the human will is invigorated by no motives that are drawn from a higher world than this,—human life will soon become barren and unfruitful: we shall gradually but surely exchange the civilisation of Europe for the civilisation of China or Japan. We are so accustomed to the sun that we take its light and warmth as a matter of course; but we do not rack our imaginations by thinking what the world's surface would be without it. Yet be sure that the world would not then be more forlorn and lifeless to the eye of man than to a spiritual eye is the soul of a man or a nation which has lost the Presence of Christ.

II.

Note, secondly, the seat or scene of this gift. The water that I shall give him shall be “in him.” This is the claim and the triumph of Jesus Christ; He does His work in the very seat and root of man's being. Others have done great works—have effected vast changes on the surface of human life. They have founded empires, imposing the will of a man or of a race upon millions of reluctant subjects: they have changed “customs and laws and even languages;” they have altered the whole outward character of a civilisation. Others again have penetrated deeper: they have founded empires not of force, but of ideas: they have so wrought upon and fashioned the shape and setting of human thought, as to reign, long after their death, in the thoughts of millions who never heard their name. But Christ has done more even than this. He is more than the Founder of a kingdom: more than the Author of a world-wide philosophy. He penetrates beyond the sphere of force and the sphere of thought to the very centre of the soul. A government may be obeyed, while it is hated: a philosophy may be accepted while no personal allegiance or love is felt for its author. Christ reigns, when He reigns, not merely over men's conduct, not merely over their ideas, but in their hearts: He places Himself at the very centre of their souls; in that inner sanctuary of consciousness whence thought and feeling arid resolve take their origin, He raises His throne. He is there not merely as a Monarch, but as a Friend; not merely as a Force, but as a Source of Life; it is not an iron hand the pressure of which the Christian feels; it is a sense of buoyancy, of invigorated power, of kindled affection, of enlarged and enlarging thought, as though his own personal being were superseded and another Higher and Wiser than himself had taken possession, and was making him that which of and by himself he could not be.

Yes, this gift is really within man: and hence Christians know, and they only know, the secret of man's dignity. The old heathen philosophies said much, and often said it well, about the human soul. Men speculated on the nature of the soul, the origin of the soul, the connection that subsists between the body and the soul; the probabilities for and against a life of the soul after the death of the body. But they did not really proclaim the dignity of man as man. Much was said about the dignity of particular individuals, classes, races of men: to be a Roman citizen, to have particular blood in your veins, to

govern a city or a province—this was great according to the ideas of the ancient world. But nothing was said about the greatness of conquered races, of women, of slaves—of slaves who outnumbered the freemen of the empire, and who were bought and sold and abused and made much of, simply as a form of personal property with no rights of their own, no accorded permission to plead the instincts of humanity, or the claims of justice. Of their dignity nothing was said: though they too were men, with warm hearts and keen intellects, and a sense of what they might be, and a sense of what they were, not less vivid than their masters'. Jesus Christ did not do His work at once; He would not provoke an uprising of the oppressed populations expressing their too natural vengeance amid scenes of lire and blood; He did not talk, as others since have talked, about the rights of man: but He did more. He placed at the very centre of the soul, alike of slave and master, the true sense of its real dignity; the instinct, the irrepressible, instinct, of communion with the All-Holy, resulting in an abundant outburst of man's noblest life within, and He left this to do its work as the centuries passed, slowly but surely, as leaven deposited in the unwieldy mass of human society. It has wrought, that leaven, from then till now. It has been heaving visibly—and with no trivial results in our own day—beyond the Atlantic; it has yet work to do, far and wide and deep, ere the work of proclaiming man's true greatness as man is complete. That proclamation will be made in its integrity only when the preciousness of Christ's inward gift to the human soul is the creed of the human race.

Christ's great gift is within; and as this is the secret of His dignity, so it is the source of His spiritual independence. If Christians were dependent on the things of sense the world might crush out—it might have crushed out long ago—the Christian life. I do not deny that the Christian life is largely supported by what meets the eye and the ear. After all, we are what God has made us—men, not angels. I do not deny that the language of the written Word, and the grace of the Sacraments can alone reach the soul through the organs of sense; so that if all copies of the Bible could be destroyed, and the administration of the Sacraments really prevented as well as forbidden, the ordinary means of grace would be cut off. But when driven to bay, and in the last resort, the soul falls back upon a Presence which is independent of sense. The world could proscribe the Christian worship, and destroy the Christian Scriptures; but its legislation is just as powerless against the Presence of the Divine Redeemer in the sanctuary of the soul as against the clouds and the sunlight. It was this which made bonds, imprisonment, death easy and welcome to our first fathers in the faith: they knew that they had not merely in heaven, but within their breasts, One Who would not leave them; One Who was Light when all else was darkness; One Who, while all outward aids were denied, was of Himself a well of water springing up into everlasting-life.

III.

The effect of this gift is its last and not its least characteristic. "Springing up into everlasting life:" to render it more exactly, springing up unto the higher life of man, which belongs to the future age of his existence. This is the real effect of Christ's Gift of His Presence to the soul. It does much besides; it makes human thought and feeling, as we have seen, fresh and active and fertile. But its true object is to be found not in the present but in the future; not in the life of this world but of the next. The life of love,

directed towards its one worthy Object, begins here, but it does not end here. It is the life of the blessed beings who inhabit the Eternal World: and Christ's gift expands within His people to prepare them for that world. Without it man would not be happy in heaven. Heaven would be hell to those in whom the true Life of the Eternal World has not yet found a place, and whose whole thought and energy is persistently directed towards the things of time and sense.

To some who hear me, it may be, it will occur to think that what has been urged is, as men speak, mystical language,—intelligible no doubt to minds of a particular cast, but not suited to the practical matter-of-fact views of conduct and duty of simple people. You know nothing then, my brethren, of the inner Well of water springing up into everlasting life? It may be there, nevertheless; like the sunshine and the atmosphere, without which your bodily life would be impossible, yet which you do not note. You know nothing, you say, of this inward gift. Then trust those who do. In the days of ancient Greece there were African travellers who penetrated so far as to find that at noonday their shadows turned towards the south. They returned and reported the fact, and it was treated by the historian of the day with entire incredulity. We know that they had simply crossed the Equator; and that their experience is shared by the passengers who crowd every mail-packet that leaves the Cape of Good Hope. But the reports which Christians bring back from the land of spiritual experience are not less certain, or more apparently incredible, than the story of the Greek travellers. The Well of water springing up to the Eternal Life only seems mystical until its reality has been practically ascertained; until, like the Samaritans, men have heard the Inner Teacher themselves, and “know that this is indeed the Christ the Saviour of the World.”

To others, again, it will occur to think: This is all very well for those who have all their way in this life, who take no thought for the morrow, because the morrow is probably well provided for; who occupy themselves with spiritual experiences, because they have leisure and abundance at command. But what of the very poor, the hard-working, the multitudes to whom life is a struggle for existence, to whom each day is like all other days, a long mechanical plodding through monotonous work; to whom each year is like other years, only that energy is fainter, and the margin between the struggler and the dark waters is narrower—those dark waters which are the only home to which despair can look forward? Ah! you say, this talk of inner refreshment rouses indignation in presence of the appalling proportions of human suffering: it is a maudlin substitute for the plain honest duties of active charity, of better education, of improved sanitary regulations, of relief administered to bodily want and pain. If it were so, you would perhaps be right, brethren, in denouncing it. If it were so, you might well doubt whether Christ had really blessed the world by His Gospel. But as matters stand, look around you, and say whether, generally speaking, and in the long-run, the philanthropists and the educators are not also the Christians: whether the inner Spring of water does not fertilise this life, as well as spring up into the moral beauties which prepare for the next. One duty does not proscribe another: and whether a man be poor or wealthy, he equally needs the inner Source of life; and if he enjoys it beyond everything else, it enables him to bear his lot in this world well, and according to his means to bless his fellow-creatures.

Indeed, this it is—the presence or absence of this inward gift—which constitutes the real difference between man and man. The names or titles we bear, the property we inherit or have acquired, the reputation which follows us,—these things are as little our

real selves as the coat we put on in the morning and take off at night. That which really belongs to us is within; it is part of that imperishable essence which is man's inmost self,—which does not weaken with disease or die with death—which lives on, somehow, necessarily and for ever. It is here that we have or have not that of which Christ spoke to the Samaritan; that which will last when all else is passing, that which will comfort and sustain when all else is proved of no avail.

To us, too, it may be, Christ comes as He came to her of Samaria, as a Petitioner: He asks us to aid His poor, or to support His Church, or to assist in the propagation of His Gospel; He would place Himself under an obligation to us—"Give Me to drink." And yet it may be that if we knew the gift of God, and Who it is That saith unto us, "Give Me to drink," we should long ago have asked of Him, and He would have given us, as He has given to others, the living water.

It may be that while we are, as was said of a great Jesuit in a past generation, buttresses of the Church, we lack that which alone makes the Church worth supporting. Outward activity and benevolence is no good substitute for the life of the soul; and whether the soul shall live is a question of prayer, of earnest importunate prayer, addressed to Him Who gave us all that, in nature or in grace, we have ever received, and Who only waits for our petitions to give yet more abundantly. Prayer is a question of earnestness: and earnestness is only natural when men have taken the measure of life and death, of the things which are seen and which are temporal, and of the things which are not seen and which are eternal.