

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 XX.
DISAPPROVAL OF FRIENDS.
Preached at St. Paul's on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 3, 1889.

PSALM xxxviii. 11.

My lovers and my neighbours did stand looking upon my trouble kinsmen stood afar off
(Prayer-Book Version.)

THE thirty-eighth, the third of the seven Penitential Psalms, belongs to those months of David's life which preceded the outbreak of Absalom's revolt. David's conscience had then become fully alive to the deadly nature of his sin with Bathsheba, involving as it did the treacherous and cruel plan for the destruction of her injured husband Uriah the Hittite, when this had also been followed by the crimes of incest and murder on the part of David's own children, Amnon and Absalom. David must have reflected that a parent, of all people, cannot hope to sin alone: that his example has an unequalled power,—as for good, so certainly for evil. It would seem from this Psalm that the remorse which David felt preyed on his spirits, and even on his bodily health. "There is no health in my flesh, because of Thy displeasure: neither is there any rest in my bones, by reason of my sin. I am brought into so great trouble and misery, that I go mourning all the day long. For my loins are filled with a sore disease: and there is no whole part in my body. I am feeble, and sore smitten; . . . my heart panteth, my strength hath failed me: and the sight of mine eyes is gone from me." This is a description of extreme nervous depression, which rapidly passes into active disease, and which, while it lasts, makes a man unable to hold up his head and address himself to the business of daily life. Such depression, whatever its cause, is a heavy punishment, especially to men, like David, of ardent temperaments. It is hard to bear when it stands alone, and when everything round a man, the kind and reassuring words of friends, the stability and prosperity of outward circumstances, help him to endeavour to shake it off, or at least to make the best of it. But in David's case these alleviations were wanting. David had known what it was to be popular, to be the object of the enthusiasm of multitudes, and of the devoted affection of a circle of trusted friends; and his character was such as to make him crave for and lean upon these tokens of general and private attachment. He had been loved and respected; but now—he could not mistake it—he was so no longer. The crimes which he had himself committed, and the crimes of which his court had been the scene, had sunk into the minds of his people, even of those among his subjects who would be naturally well-affected towards his person and his throne. They could not understand how the sweet Psalmist of Israel in the days of Saul, how the man after God's own heart, how the favoured shepherd-boy, who had been taken by God from following the ewes that he might feed Jacob His people and Israel His inheritance, could stand forth in the fierce light which beats upon an Eastern throne as a vulgar adulterer and murderer: and so, we may be sure, with misgiving, and

reluctance, and pain, and shame, they kept aloof from him. In no case, probably, would they have joined an unfilial adventurer like Absalom, or have exchanged distance and coldness for any more distinctly hostile attitude; but with David they could not be on their old terms of intimate and effusive loyalty; king though David was, they kept at a distance from his court, and David knew and felt what their estrangement meant. "My lovers and my neighbours did stand looking upon my trouble; and my kinsmen stood afar off." If they who were nearest to him were thus minded, could he wonder that others went further? Could he fail to hear the mutterings of the rising storm which was to shake his throne to its foundations, and drive him into temporary exile, and put him in peril of his life,—the storm which ever breaks, sooner or later, on kings, and states, as well as on individual men, when the moral supports of human life have been shattered by wrongdoing? "They also that sought after my life laid snares for me. And they that went about to do me evil talked of wickedness, and imagined deceit all the day long."

This alienation of David's friends suggests practical reflections in connection with the season of the year.

I. Why, you may ask, should David have cared so much about it? After all, it may be urged, if a man declines our intimacy, we may regret it, but there is no more to be said. Friends are a blessing, no doubt: but it is possible to exaggerate the value of friendship, and a sensitive and sympathetic temper is very likely, indeed, to do so.

My brethren, you must admit, on reflection, that this is not the whole account of the matter. If a friend represents nothing but a certain measure of personal goodwill towards us, if he does not represent anything that we instinctively respect, such as high character, or a holy and consistent life, we may not feel keenly about the loss of his goodwill. But if he is a man whom we respect as well as love, and whom we love because we respect him: if he is a man who invites our confidence by his tenderness, his truthfulness, his simplicity, his courage: if we are as sure of him as we can be of any man that his intercourse with us is regulated, not by the wish to get something from us, nor yet by the desire to give us pleasure, but by a higher principle of duty, which rules him throughout and consistently: then the withdrawal of his friendship must be felt to be a serious blow,—nay, a punishment. For we reflect that such a man as I have described does not merely represent himself; that he is a representative upon earth of a higher Mind and Presence; and that when he stands aloof from us, and renounces intercourse with us, we may already hear, though afar off, the voice of the Judgment of God.

It is, of course, possible that a good man may withdraw his friendship in consequence of a mistake. He may have heard some report about his friend which is a malicious slander, but the true character of which he has at the time no means of discovering; or he may err through an infirmity of judgment, to which the best men are from time to time liable. There have been instances in our own days, as in former generations, of good men, renouncing a friendship for utterly insufficient or indeed baseless reasons on account of an imagined wrong or a trivial difference of opinion. When this is the case the object of the alienation or coldness may fall back on his conscience and on God. If he really finds nothing within to justify the withdrawal of the friendship, he may make up his mind to bear what he cannot help. His true Friend, of Whose enduring tenderness all earthly friendships are but poor and faint shadows, is still with him. A psalmist could even say, "When my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord taketh me up."

But in David's present case this was impossible. David's conscience told him that the friends of his person and his throne who stood aloof from him were right; that God was with them, and not with himself; that their action was a reflection of God's judgment. Conscience makes cowards at any rate of those sinners who cannot succeed in silencing its voice; and the events of the day, and the words and actions of men around, even when directed by no distinct purpose, appear, to its sensitive anxiety, to echo the Divine judgment. David may have even seen in the estrangement of his friends more than some of them meant; his unquiet sense of guilt may have read into their actions a purpose of which they were very imperfectly conscious. But the result was the same: David was miserable. "My lovers and my neighbours did stand looking upon my trouble: and my kinsmen stood afar off."

2. He Who was of the house and lineage of David—David's Son, and yet David's Lord,—knew in His bitter Passion what it was to be utterly deserted by human friends. When kind words and reassuring looks would have been welcome to His Human Soul, all His disciples forsook Him and fled. But what a contrast between His case and that of David! If He suffered on this score, so that David's words have a prophetic reference to Him, He suffered only from wounded affections, without any misgiving or distress of conscience. If He was deserted by His friends in His hour of darkness, the shame was not His, but theirs. Their desertion of Him expressed not God's judgment on sin, but the world's opposition to sanctity; and Jesus could only think of them with compassion—never for a moment, as David thought of the friends who kept aloof from him, with a secret though mortified reverence, based on a conviction that they were right.

My brethren, if any one of us has to put up with coldness and aversion, for which he knows there is no real reason, he may think of and unite himself in spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ; praying Him to bless this note of likeness to that which He Himself condescended to endure in His bitter Passion, and to vouchsafe to sanctify this light affliction by the awful mental Pain which He condescended for our sakes to endure.

Human friends may be parted from, though not without a heartache, when the Friend of friends is still on the same terms as ever with the conscience and the will, but if any of us, like David, have lost friends for what conscience tells us are good reasons, let us be sure that it is well for us that we should have lost them. It is better that all wrongdoing should be punished in this world rather than in the next, and punished in a manner which will lead us most surely and swiftly to return to God. To be far from Him in truth, yet surrounded by kind treatment, which implies that all is with us as it should be, is to be in danger of living and dying in a perilous illusion.

A rude awakening here on earth is doubtless trying to flesh and blood; but anything is better than an awakening deferred until the time when probation shall be over, and the door of repentance shall be shut. David's bitter solitariness prompted the prayer: "I will confess my wickedness, and be sorry for my sin. Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not Thou far from me." And we Christians know that if God leaves us in His mercy to ourselves, to our own thoughts of shame and sorrow for acts and words which He must condemn, and the condemnation of which we seem to trace in the altered bearing of those among His servants whom we respect and love; yet that, "if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins," because "the Blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth from all sin."