

Passiontide Sermons  
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SERMON V.  
THE CLEANSING BLOOD.  
Preached at St. Paul's on Passion Sunday, April 7, 1878.

Heb. ix. 13, 14.

For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the Blood of Christ, Who through the Eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

TO-DAY we pass the line which parts the first five weeks in Lent from that last fortnight which is especially devoted to contemplating the Sufferings and Death of our Lord Jesus Christ. And accordingly, the Gospel tells us of the attempt of the Jews to stone Him in the Temple—one of the first drops (as it has been well termed) of that storm which burst in all its fury upon Calvary.

And the Epistle<sup>1</sup> teaches us how to think about Him in the whole course of these His sufferings. He is not only a good man weighed down by so much pain of body and mind; He is the High Priest of the human race, Who is offering a victim in expiation of human sin, and that victim is Himself; He is the one real Sacrifice, of whom all the Jewish priests had, for long centuries, been only shadows; and His sacrifice is the One Offering which throughout all ages has power in heaven. And so, as He passes within the veil of the Sanctuary above, He is opening a way for us, if we will only follow, to an eternal home in the very Heart of God. "Christ being come an High Priest of good things to come, ... by His Own blood entered in once into the Holy Place, having obtained eternal redemption for us."

I.

That which must strike all careful readers of the Bible, in the passages which refer to the Sufferings and Death of Jesus Christ, is the stress which is laid upon His Blood. A long course of violent treatment, ending in such a death as that of crucifixion, must involve, we know from the nature of the case, the shedding the blood of the sufferer. But our modern feeling would probably have led us to treat this as an accidental or subordinate feature of His Death. We, if we had had with our human feelings to write the books which are the title-deeds of Christendom, should either not refer to it, or we should pass lightly and quickly over it; we should throw it into the background of our description. We should give the outline, and let the details be taken for granted. "We should trust to the

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<sup>1</sup> The *Gospel* for the Fifth Sunday in Lent is from St. John viii. 46-59. The *Epistle* is from Heb. ix. 11-15.

imaginings of our readers to fill up the blank; we should shrink from stimulating their sensibilities to pain, from harrowing their feelings by anything beyond. Does it not seem as if we carried into modern life that rule of the old Greek tragedians that if possible, nothing tragic or violent, that spoils and gives pain, should meet the eye? If a deed of violence takes place in our streets or homes, do we not remove all traces of it as quickly as may be? Has it not been urged as a reason for putting criminals to death by hanging, instead of adopting some more rapid and certain mode of destroying life, that it is desirable to spare the bystanders the sight of blood?

This modern feeling is far from being mere unhealthy sentimentalism; it arises from that honourable sympathy with and respect for human nature which draws a veil over its miseries or its wounds. But the New Testament, in its treatment of the Passion of Christ, is, we cannot but observe, strangely and strongly in contrast with such a feeling. The four Evangelists, who differ so much in their accounts of our Lord's Birth and public Ministry, seem to meet around the foot of the Cross, and to agree, if not in relating the same incidents, yet certainly in the minuteness and detail of their narratives. In the shortest of the Gospels, when we reach the Passion, the occurrences of a day take up as much space as had previously been assigned to years. From the Last Supper to the Burial in the grave of Joseph of Arimathea, we have a very complete account of what took place; each incident that added to pain or shame, each bitter word, each insulting act, each outrage upon justice or mercy, of which the Divine Sufferer was a victim, is carefully recorded. But, especially, the Agony and Bloody Sweat, the public Scourging, the Crowning with thorns, the nailing to the wood of the Cross, the opening the Side with a spear, are described by the Evangelists,—incidents, each one of them, be it observed, which must have involved the shedding of Christ's Blood. And in the writings of the Apostles to their first converts more is said of the Blood of Christ than of anything else connected with His Death—more even than of the Cross. As we read them we might almost think that the shedding of His Blood was not so much an accompaniment of His Death as its main purpose. Thus St. Paul tells the Romans that Christ is set forth to be a "propitiation through faith in His Blood;" that they are "justified" by Christ's Blood. He writes to the Ephesians "that they have "redemption through Christ's Blood;" to the Colossians that our Lord has "made peace through the Blood of His Cross;" to the Corinthians that the Holy Sacrament is so solemn a rite because it is "the communion of the Blood of Christ." Thus St. Peter contrasts the slaves whose freedom from captivity was purchased with corruptible things such as silver and gold with the case of Christians redeemed by "the precious Blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish, and immaculate." Thus St. John exclaims that "the Blood of Jesus Christ the Son of God cleanseth us from all sin." In the Epistle to the Hebrews this Blood is referred to as "the Blood of the Covenant wherewith Christians are sanctified," as "the Blood of the Everlasting Covenant," as "the Blood of sprinkling" which pleads for mercy, and so is contrasted with the blood of Abel that cries for vengeance. And in the last book of the New Testament the beloved Disciple gives at the very outset thanks and praise to "Him That has washed us from our sins in His own Blood;" and the blessed in heaven sing that He has "redeemed them to God by His Blood;" and the saints "have washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb;" and they have overcome their foe, not in their own might, but by "the Blood of the Lamb;" and He Whose Name is called "the Word of God," and Who rides on a white horse, and on Whose head are many crowns, is

“clothed in a vesture dipped in blood.”

Much more might be said on the subject; but enough has been said to show that, in the New Testament, the Blood of Christ is treated as no mere accident of His Death, but as a very important feature of it; nay, as having a substantive value, of whatever kind, which is all its own. And the question is, How are we to account for the prominence which is thus assigned to it?

## II.

This question is sometimes answered by saying that the language of the Apostles about the Blood of Christ is, after all, only the language of metaphor and symbol. The Apostles, we are told, found in the Old Testament a stock of poetic illustration and imagery ready to their hands, and although it had reference to the ideas and usages of a dying system, they employed it freely for their own purposes, much as cultivated gentlemen of a past generation used to quote the Greek and Latin poets in Parliament or in society by way of decorating new ideas with the phrases of a literature which had passed away.

This is what has been urged by some modern writers. But any such account of the Apostolic language about the Preciousness and Power of the Blood of Jesus Christ, is unworthy at once of the seriousness of the men and of the seriousness of the subject. Unworthy of the seriousness of the men; for, after all, the Apostles and Apostolic writers were not mere retailers of splendid phrases, but teachers of a truth which they believed to have come from heaven, and for which they were prepared to die. And unworthy of the seriousness of the subject; for surely the deepest truths that can move the hearts and wills of men, are not fit subjects for mere antiquarian or literary display; they would be better avoided, if they are not set forth in the clearest and plainest language which those who profess to teach them can command. If the Apostles used the language of the Old Testament about the Jewish sacrifices in order to describe their own faith about the Atoning work of Christ, this was because, in the belief of the Apostles, a real relation already existed between the two things; the Jewish sacrifices were predestined types and shadows of the Sacrificed Son of God.

In the passage before us the Day of Atonement and its characteristic rites are throughout present to the mind of the sacred writer; and of those rites the sprinkling the blood of the victims was a prominent feature. But the question still remains, Why should this effusion of blood have been a prominent feature on the Jewish Day of Atonement? Why should it have been allowed so largely to colour the thought and words of the Apostles? Why should the Blood of the Redeemer, rather than His pierced Hands, or His thorn-crowned Head, or His bruised and mangled Body, or His Face with its Divine Radiance shining through the tears and the shame, be dwelt on in the Apostolic writings as the chosen symbol of His Passion and Death?

Certainly, in all the languages of the world, blood is the proof and warrant of affection and of sacrifice. To shed blood voluntarily for another is to give the best that man can give; it is to give a sensible proof of, almost a bodily form to, love. This one human instinct is common to all ages, to all civilisations, to all religions. The blood of the soldier who dies for duty, the blood of the martyr who dies for truth, the blood of the man who dies that another may live—blood like this is the embodiment of the highest moral powers in human life, and those powers were all represented in the Blood which flowed

from the Wounds of Christ on Calvary. And yet in saying this we have not altogether accounted for the Apostolic sayings about the Blood of Christ. It involves something more than any of these moral triumphs; it is more than all of them taken together.

Observe, my brethren, the peculiar and deep significance which is ascribed to blood in the earliest books in the Bible—the Books of Moses. There we are taught that between the blood, whether of man or animal, and the life-principle or soul, there is a certain and intimate connection. In those primal laws which were given to Noah after the Flood, man was authorised to eat the flesh, but not the blood of the animals around him. Why was this? Because the blood is the life or soul of the animal. “Flesh, with the blood thereof, which is the life thereof, shall ye not eat.” The Laws of Moses go further: the man, whether Israelite or stranger, who eats any manner of blood, is to be destroyed; and the reason is repeated: “The soul of the flesh,” i.e. of the nature living in the flesh, “is in the blood.” This is why the blood of the sacrificial animals is shed by way of atonement for sin; the blood atones—this is the strict import of the original language—by means of the soul that is in it. Once more, in the Fifth Book of Moses, permission is given to the Israelites to kill and eat the sacrificial animals just as freely as the roebuck or the hart, which were not used for sacrifice. But, again, there follows the caution: “Only be sure that thou eat not the blood;” and the reason for the caution: “the blood is the soul; and thou mayest not eat the soul with the flesh. Thou shalt not eat of it; thou shalt pour it upon the earth like water.” The thrice-repeated precept—not to touch animal blood—has passed away, together with much else in the ancient Law. True; it was enforced by prophets, who insisted little or not at all on the ceremonial provisions of the Mosaic code; it was upheld for a while even by Apostles, as binding upon the first converts from heathendom; it was adhered to, not indeed universally, but with much tenacity in the primitive Christian Church. But it has gone the way of the ceremonial system, of which it formed a part, and which was only fulfilled to disappear. Yet the reason of the precept remains, as a matter of lasting interest; the reason, namely, that blood is that element of our animal existence which is most closely associated with the principle of life.

What life is in itself—whether in tree or animal, whether in man or angel—who shall say? It is a mystery ever close to us, yet ever eluding our inquisitive research. We associate intelligence with the brain; we trace the unspoken language of the soul in the movements or motionlessness of the countenance, in the expression of the eye, in the gesture of the hand, even in the gait or sway of the body. Of this we find little in Scripture which, without denying the relation of the soul to other parts of our bodily frame, does, unquestionably, so far as the soul is the principle of life, feeling, and growth, associate it with the blood.

The question may be fairly asked, whether this Scripture doctrine of the intimate relation of the soul or life-power to the blood is borne out by independent inquiry. It is obvious, first of all, that the strength of the body depends on the quantity of the blood; that with the loss of blood, feeling, power of movement, all the bodily activities, are lost also. The blood, then, is the basis or support of bodily life. But it is more: it is also the material from which the body and its various secretions arise: it is the substance out of which the animal life in all its forms is developed. Whether the various kinds of material which make up the human body are contained in the blood in a state of actual diversity, or whether they exist in it only in potency, and are drawn out of it by the functional powers of the bodily organs, is a matter of controversy; but it is agreed, by high

authorities on such subjects, that they do thus pre-exist in the blood, which is thus the principle, not merely of bodily life, but of bodily growth and formation.

This, then, is what is assumed when Scripture speaks of the blood as the life or soul of a man or animal. But, as a Jewish writer has observed,<sup>2</sup> the soul in question is only the sensitive soul, which man possesses in common with animals: it is not the thinking, intelligent, self-conscious being—the spirit—which proceeds immediately from God, and is encased in the sensitive soul as the apple of an eye is in the eye. The spirit of man is only so far resident in the blood as it is resident in the sensitive soul, which is in the blood; the existence of the spirit of man is strictly independent of any element of his bodily life, and, as we know, will survive it.

But in Christ our Lord there was something more than body and soul and spirit; since in Him dwelt “all the fulness of the Godhead.” As man differs from the animals in possessing an undying spirit, as well as, and together with, a sensitive soul or life; so in Christ our Lord were joined, by an intimate and indissoluble union, not merely a human soul and spirit, but also, and above these, that Divine Nature which was “begotten of the Father before all worlds.” Nay, rather, it was this, His Eternal Person Which owned all else in Him, in Which all else centred, to Which all else attached itself. When He Who had already existed from all eternity vouchsafed to enter into the sphere of time, He wrapped around Him in its completeness, but without its stains, that human nature which then He made His own; He took it upon Him, not as a garment which He might lay aside, but as that which was from the moment of His Incarnation, and for ever, to form part of His Being. And therefore the Blood which flowed in His veins, and which He shed at His Circumcision and in His mental Agony, not less than in His Scourging, and on the Cross, was the Blood, not merely of the Son of Mary, but of the Infinite and Eternal Being thus condescendingly united to a created form;—it is an Apostle who bids the pastors of the church of Ephesus “feed the Church of God, which He hath purchased with His own Blood.”

This, then, is what is meant in the text, when it contrasts the Atoning power of the Blood of Christ with that of the blood of bulls and goats. The blood of the sacrificed animal had a certain value, because, as we have seen, it was so intimately connected with the life or sensitive soul of the animal; as the Apostle puts it, it did, and by Divine appointment, sanctify to the purifying of the flesh. By the “flesh” is here meant the natural, outward, and earthly life of man; especially all that bore in the way of outward conduct and condition upon his membership of the commonwealth of Israel. The sacrifices on the Day of Atonement, and especially the sprinkling of the blood of the red heifer, towards the tabernacle, did signify the substitution of life for life, and were at any rate accepted as establishing the outward religious position of those for whom they were offered. That they could do more was impossible: the nature of things was opposed to it: “it was not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.” The blood of these animals could not operate in the proper sphere of spiritual natures. But then it foreshadowed nothing less than the Blood of Christ. It was His Blood, Who through His Eternal Spiritual Being (it is not the Holy Ghost Who is here meant, but the Divine Nature of the Incarnate Christ) offered Himself without spot to God. The Eternal Spiritual Nature of Christ, vivifying the Blood of Christ, is contrasted in the Apostle’s thought with the perishable life of the sacrificed animal resident in the blood of the animal; and so

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<sup>2</sup> Philo, *Op. ed.* Mangey, i. 206, 207.

the value of the sacrifices, the power of the blood to cleanse or save, varies with the dignity of the life which it represents—in one case that of the creature, not even endowed with reason or immortality; in the other that of the Infinite and Eternal Being Who for us men, and for our salvation, has come down from heaven.

“How much more shall the Blood of Christ!” At length we see, then, what it is that the sacred writer really means. He says in effect to his readers, “You have no doubt that, under the old Jewish dispensation, the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement, the blood of the slaughtered goat and red heifer, could restore the Israelite who had done wrong to his place and his privileges in the sacred nation. It sanctified to the purifying of the flesh. But here is the Blood—not of a sacrificial animal, not of a mere man, not even of the best of men, hut of One Who was God “manifest in the flesh.” Who shall calculate the effects of His self-sacrifice? Who shall limit the power of His voluntary death? Who shall say what His outpoured Blood may or may not achieve on earth or elsewhere? Plainly we are here in the presence of an agency which altogether distances and rebukes the speculations of reason; we can but listen for some voice that shall speak with authority, and from beyond the veil: we can but be sure of this, that the Blood of the eternal Christ must infinitely transcend in its efficacy that of the victims slain on the Temple altars; It must be much more than equal to redress the woes, to efface the transgressions, of a guilty world.

### III.

This, indeed, is what the argument invites,—the absolutely limitless power of the Precious Blood. But the sacred writer puts, as it were, a restraint upon himself, and contents himself with pointing to a single result. “How much more shall the Blood of Christ purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”

“Dead works:” works that are not good, in that their motive is good, nor bad, in that their motive is bad, but dead in that they have no motive at all—in that they are merely outward and mechanical,—affairs of propriety, routine, and form, to which the heart and spirit contribute nothing. “Dead works:” to how much of our lives, ay, of the better and religious side of our lives, may not this vivid and stern expression justly apply! How many acts in the day are gone through without intention, without deliberation, without effort, to consecrate them to God, without any reflex effect upon the faith and love of the doer! How many prayers, and words, and deeds are of this character; and, if so, how are they wrapping our spirits round with bandages of insincere habit, on which already the avenging angels may have traced the motto, ‘Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead’! The Blood of Christ delivers from much else; but especially from those dead works. For as the blood of the slain animal means the life of the animal, so the Blood of Christ crucified means the Life of Christ,—His Life Who is eternal Truth and eternal Charity. And thus, when a Christian man feels Its Redemptive touch within him, he has a motive—varying in strength, but always powerful—for being genuine. He means his deeds, his words, his prayers. He knows that life is a solemn thing, and has tremendous issues; he measures these issues by the value of the Redeeming Blood. If Christ has shed His Blood, surely life is well worth living; it is worth saving. A new energy is thrown into everything; a new interest lights up all the surrounding circumstances—the incidents of life, its opportunities, its trials, its failures, its

successes,—the character and disposition of friends, the public occurrences of the time, and the details of the home,—are looked at with eyes which see nothing that is indifferent; and when all is meant for God’s glory, though there may and must be much weakness and inconsistency, the conscience is practically purged from dead works to serve the living God.

The Blood of Christ! It was shed on Calvary eighteen hundred years ago: but It flows on throughout all time. It belongs now, not to the physical but to the spiritual world. It washes souls, not bodies; It is sprinkled not on altars but on consciences. But, although invisible, It is not for all that the less real and energetic; It is the secret power of all that purifies or that invigorates souls in Christendom. Do we believe in “one Baptism for the remission of sins”? It is because Christ’s Blood tinges the waters of the font to the eyes of faith. Do we believe that God “hath given power and commandment to His ministers to declare and pronounce to His people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins”? It is because the Blood of Christ, applied to the conscience by the Holy Spirit, makes this declaration an effective reality. Do we find in the Bible more than an ancient literature,—in Christian instruction more than a mental exercise,—in the life of thought about the unseen and the future more than food for speculation? This is because we know that the deepest of all questions is that which touches our moral state before God; and that, as sinners, we are above all things interested in the “Fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness” in the Blood of Christ. Do we look to our successive Communion for the strengthening and refreshing of our souls? This is because the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, Which was shed for us of old, and is given us now, can “preserve our bodies and souls unto everlasting life.” Does even a single prayer, offered in entire sincerity of purpose, avail to save a despairing soul? It is because “we have boldness to enter into the holiest by the Blood of Jesus”! The Blood of Christ! Who of us does not need to be sprinkled with it? Christians as we are, what are our lives, our habits, our daily thoughts, the whole course of our existence, as they lie spread out before the Eyes of the All-seeing Judge? The works from which we need to be purged are, it may be, not merely soulless and dead, but actively evil! The prayer which befits us, kneeling before our Crucified Master, is not merely, “Purge my conscience from dead works to serve the living God,” but, “Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin.” Let one or both of these prayers, my brethren, be ours during this ensuing sacred season. If they are offered earnestly they will not be unheard; for the Eternal Spirit is here, to sprinkle all souls that seek purification or pardon with the Precious Blood. And the old promise made to Israel in Egypt still holds good, and may be claimed in a far higher sense by the Israel of God, whether in life or in death: “When I see the Blood I will pass over; and the plague shall not be upon you.”