

The Present and the Past.

A

THANKSGIVING SERMON

PREACHED IN THE

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

ALBANY,

Thursday, November 29, 1877,

BY

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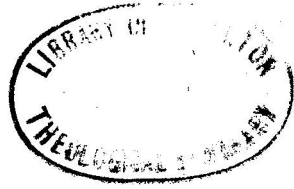
PASTOR OF THE CHURCH.

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SERMON.

Psalm cxlv, 4—"One generation shall praise Thy works to another, and shall declare Thy mighty acts."

In the year 1817, sixty years ago, this annual Thanksgiving day was for the first time generally observed in this State. Before the year 1817, days of public thanksgiving had been occasionally observed. Both in New Netherlands, and in the colony of New York under the English government, such days were appointed. The journals of the Continental Congress contain eight several appointments of days of thanksgiving. A similar recommendation was issued once by President Washington, and twice during the administration of the elder Adams. These days were generally observed in this State, as well as elsewhere throughout the country. But all of these were special appointments, to express some extraordinary public rejoicing. Different denominations of Christian people had occasionally observed days of thanksgiving to Almighty God, near the appropriate time for a harvest festival; but this observance was not uniform in time, nor general throughout the State.

Gov. John Jay, at the beginning of his administration, in 1795, issued a proclamation, recommending a day of thanksgiving and prayer; but it was received with no general response or public favor. His political opponents affirmed it to be a contrivance to enlist the prejudices of

the Christian public in his behalf. So strong was the opposition that Gov. Jay never repeated his proclamation. It was not until nearly a generation had passed away, and thirty-four years after the acknowledgment of our national independence, that this series of annual thanksgiving days, to which we are now accustomed, began in this State, on the 13th of November, 1817—a little more than sixty years ago. De Witt Clinton was inaugurated Governor of this State on the first day of July of that year, and one of his first official acts was the renewal of this experiment of public thanksgiving that John Jay had tried without success.

It is a matter of tradition that the first pastor of this church, the Rev. Dr. John Chester, influenced the Governor in this act. There may be some truth in this tradition, for the memory of the zeal and devotion of the young minister, who gave his life to this people, is still fragrant among us. And may it be long before that fragrance shall pass away! There may be some truth in the tradition, for Governor Clinton was a constant attendant upon the ministry of Dr. Chester. And yet we fancy that the Governor's remarkably intelligent vigor, largely derived from his Protestant Irish ancestry, required not much urging to the performance of so grateful a Christian duty!

But however this may have been, the appointment of this day of Thanksgiving met with very general approval. Some surprise was expressed in New England, that the people of New York should be willing to adopt this peculiarly New England custom. And many of the inhabitants of the eastern part of Long Island, who had for years observed a day of their own appointment, seriously doubted whether they should accept this substi-

tute; being suspicious that the secret intention might be to unsettle and break up the custom of a Thanksgiving day altogether. But on the whole, the proclamation was well received. As I have read in one of the newspapers published in this city at the time, most of the places of business were closed on the day appointed. A Sabbath decency and decorum prevailed. Attentive audiences occupied the churches and eloquent sermons were preached. In this church, as I learn from one who was present on that day, who has worshiped with us here for more than sixty years,—from this pulpit the sermon was preached by the Rev. Edward Dorr Griffin.

Dr. Griffin was one of the most famous and impressive and powerful preachers of his day. Just before this time, he had been the first pastor of Park street Church in Boston, and was afterward President of Williams' College. We are told that he closed his discourse in this church, on that memorable day, with the comfortable words of the prophet Nehemiah: "Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy unto our Lord; neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." And to these words of the prophet, repeated in this pulpit, I have no doubt Dr. Griffin added these other words, with which he almost invariably closed his discourses: "Hallelujah, Amen!"

I know not what were the subjects presented from the various pulpits of Albany on that day, but it would be strange if the motives for thanksgiving proclaimed at that time by Governor Clinton, were not enlarged upon and enforced. It was the custom of the day to read the proclamation in the churches, and thus special attention would be called at the time to the points presented. And

as I have read this, the first in the series already long, of thanksgiving proclamations by the Governors of the Commonwealth, I have been impressed by the fact that from generation to generation, the motives for thanksgiving are almost the same. The people of one age can but repeat the praises that have been offered by the people of preceding ages. "One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts." The whole service of thanksgiving from year to year is but one long succession of antiphonal chants, each generation repeating to the next the praises of God for similar acts of goodness and mercy in one continuous anthem of praise. In this year of our Lord, 1877, we may have the same motives for thanksgiving that influenced the people who gathered in these sanctuaries of the everliving God sixty years ago. The motives are indeed similar, yet how greatly has their power increased! Blessings of the same class are multiplied as time proceeds. The chorus of thanksgiving should increase in strength, and in numbers, and in volume, with ever-increasing harmony as the years roll on! Let us consider, in succession, the leading motives that led the people to give thanks to God in this house of prayer sixty years ago, and we shall see, I think, how these very motives have tenfold force just now. The children and the grandchildren have far more reason to be thankful to God for similar benefits than were their fathers.

Gov. Clinton called upon the people of this State to give thanks for "the abundant productions of the earth." How much more to-day have we reason to be thankful, that, in the words of our own Executive, "the harvests of the year have been singularly bountiful." So far as God's providence is concerned there may

be but little or no difference. The sunshine and the rain, winter and summer, seed-time and harvest, still succeed each other according to the promise of God in bountiful succession. And yet as the result of the mental and physical labor of man, how much more is the earth compelled to yield than was obtained from it sixty years ago! When Gov. Clinton wrote his proclamation, wooden ploughs were still in use by very many farmers in this State. There were few or no agricultural journals. The people rejected and ridiculed "book farming" as impertinent and useless. They knew as little of the chemistry of agriculture as of the problems of astronomy. Farmers worked with their hands, but not with their brains. They made furrows but no figures. They had no thought of increasing the value by increasing the productiveness of the soil. They lived, pursuing precisely the same routine of labor that their fathers did. When our fathers in this temple gave thanks for the abundant productions of the earth, more than half the land in western and northern New York was unproductive. And out of this State, the peninsular of Michigan was almost an unbroken forest. The boundless prairies were still unwearyed by the plough share. Tecumseh and the Prophet had only just been slain; and Black Hawk still reigned over thousands of untilled acres, as well as over thousands of untutored savages. But now God has so blessed the application of mind to agriculture, that in this age of steam-ploughs and of all manner of inventions for saving and simplifying toil, the agriculturist, of all men, has least occasion to grumble over the present or sigh for the past. So great is "the abundance" of this year that our means of transportation are hardly sufficient to carry the products of our soil from the prairies to the sea. God has so blessed us

in the development of the agricultural productions of the land, that by reason of their variety, as well as abundance, a famine seems hardly possible here. So varied is our climate, and such is the variety of products in the same region, that famines like those of India or China seem impossible in this land. Let us thank God for the singular delight and abundance of this year and its harvest festival.

But again, sixty years ago our fathers in this house of God gave thanks in the words of Gov. Clinton, for "the prevalence of general health." And we are reminded by our own Executive of the continuance during the past year of the same blessing.

Sickness and pain and death are the inevitable lot of the race. At any time, to speak of the prevalence of general health is to make use of a very exceptionable statement—a statement under which the exceptions are so numerous as almost to invalidate the declaration itself. And yet there can be no doubt that we are called to-day to thank God for more in this direction than our fathers received. The epidemics which they feared have largely lost their terror. And other epidemics that since their day have frightened the world, have been brought under control. So great also has been the enlargement of the materia medica; so close is the investigation of disease by more and more perfect microscopic and other methods; so many discoveries have been made of remedies hitherto unknown, or new applications given to those already known, that the power of disease has been greatly reduced and suffering greatly alleviated. Habits of living have in some respects improved. The laws of health are at least better understood. Ventilation and the structure of dwellings are more carefully regarded.

"The mechanic of to-day may be better housed than the monarch of five centuries ago." There can be no doubt that as a result of these things, human life has been lengthened. The average length of a generation when our fathers celebrated here their first Thanksgiving day was not quite 33 years. To-day the most carefully constructed tables make it at least 35 years. And when also we remember the great number of institutions of benevolence that have been established or greatly improved, within the last half century, for the cure and comfort of the helpless, the sick and infirm, we may well thank God to-day not only for the measure of health that he has given to us and our households, but for the agencies that in these days we ourselves may employ to give the same blessing to others. Let us repeat and reiterate the ancestral anthem of praise for the general prevalence of health throughout the land.

But our fathers also followed the lead of their Chief Executive, in giving thanks as he recommended for "the increasing diffusion of the lights of knowledge, and for the flourishing state of our seminaries of education." Our immediate ancestors were not ignorant people. We should be sorry to subject ourselves to the charge of saying that wisdom began with us. And they certainly would not have thought of affirming that all wisdom would die with them. But they were more reflective than their descendants. They thought out principles. We moderns are more observing. While they thought out and gathered together principles, and thus gained, if I may call it so, a knowledge of ideas, we observe facts and collect these facts together into systems of natural science. Hence the knowledge of phenomena is the knowledge of modern times. Within sixty years we

may not have greatly advanced our knowledge of philosophy, but we have immensely increased the circle of the sciences. Such names as botany and geology, and chemistry and mineralogy, are by no means modern names. They were, perhaps, as familiar sixty years ago as now. But the sciences themselves that these names represent, are now almost a new thing! The difference between what they were then and what they are now, is but faintly represented by the 11,000 botanical species of Linnæus when he died, near the beginning of the present century, and the more than 100,000 distinct species now recorded. And there are some sciences, there is some classified knowledge that our immediate ancestors never supposed could be classified. Such, for example, is meteorology, the science of the atmosphere, of its winds and storms and currents. But in no direction is the increase of knowledge more evident and more profitable, and for none have we more reason to be thankful than for the modern increase of knowledge of the Scriptures. Our fathers who gathered in this house of God on the 13th of November, 1817, many of them knew a great deal about the Bible. They had reflected upon its truths. They had conned them over; they had thought them out. Some of them, in this respect, may have been "mighty in the Scriptures." With the aid of the Holy Spirit, they had gained strength to wield the truths of the Bible by reflecting upon them. Such commentators as the excellent Thomas Scott, and the bright and interesting and practical Mathew Henry, did their work in the same way. In apprehending the truths of the Bible, and in helping others apply these truths, they did good service. But the moderns have increased our knowledge of the Scriptures themselves by a more accurate study of

the text; thus bringing out the exact meaning of the inspired writers. The history of the Bible, the ten thousand allusions it contains to men and things of the time in which it was written—how many of these also have been brought out in all their truth and beauty! To what severe tests also have these Scriptures been put, under the microscope of modern scholarship! and how triumphant has been the result! and what additions have we made to valuable knowledge! and how should we give thanks for them!

But not only has knowledge, secular and sacred, been greatly increased; it has been widely diffused since the time when thanksgiving was here first publicly offered for its diffusion. In Governor Clinton's day, it placed a man among the favored few to be educated. It made him a distinguished man immediately! Not so now. Rather the opposite. He is getting to be the man of mark who is not educated. And how greatly the means for this diffusion have been increased! Every college in this State but three has been founded since 1817. And since that date how many public libraries have been established and largely increased! The Library of our own State, which is so advantageous to this city, was not founded till 1818; but now it numbers more than 103,000 volumes. Among the other good works of Governor Clinton, this should not be forgotten, for he himself, with John Taylor and James Kent, were its first Trustees. Better methods for the increase of education are now employed. The use of lotteries to gain money for educational purposes is no longer approved. Lancasterian schools, in which poor children taught each other, are not now regarded as the very best; yet this was the favorite method when our fathers gathered here to be thankful for the diffusion of

knowledge. The leading newspaper in this city at the time, although edited by one of the ablest editors of the State, was no larger than the smallest published in this city now. What a contrast to the folios of information that are spread before you to-day! I believe in the diffusion of knowledge and education. I do not believe in its consolidation. I do not believe it safe to keep the multitude in ignorance; neither do I believe it to be wise to consolidate various schools of learning into one great university. I believe the diffusion of education to be essential to the life of a free State. You may tell me that mediocrity will be the result of general culture. It may be so. But "if wise men do not arise, there will certainly be more wisdom." In the words of George Bancroft, "the collective man of the future will see farther and will see more clearly than the collective man of to-day," and every one in his time will share his vision and its clearness.

I thank God for such a diffusion of education, that the child of to-day could teach Columbus geography, and Newton light, and Franklin electricity. I thank God that Christian education has been so diffused that farmers or mechanics in Christian churches can solve questions about God and destiny and duty, which in old times perplexed the most gifted thinkers.

And still further we have more reason than our fathers to be thankful, not only for abundance, for health, and for the diffusion of knowledge, but far more than they, for what was declared to them to be "the successful progress of useful improvements." We are familiar with this kind of progress; we are often reminded of it. And yet, I think we are not likely to appreciate the difference between now and then. No doubt, when

the Executive, in 1817, reminded his fellow-citizens of the improvements that were progressing, he had in mind, and they would think of that great work by which Lake Erie was soon to be married to the sea. The construction of the Erie Canal had just then been commenced; sixty miles had been contracted for. It was a great thing for Dewitt Clinton to have projected the Erie Canal, to have thought it out, as it was thought out by himself alone, in his home on the Hudson. It was a great thing to overcome the opposition of all sorts of people and pamphleteers and legislators, who called it absurd and visionary and impractical and designing and Jesuitical and dangerous; and I have no doubt if they had thought of it, they would have even profanely asserted as did a modern statesman, that if God had designed to have such a channel he would have built it! It was worthy of grateful acknowledgment, that the Executive had been permitted, a few months before, to break with his own hand the ground for the beginning of this enterprise. And afterward, it was still more suggestive of grateful feelings, when the projector of this great work was himself borne in a barge on the artificial river, almost of his own construction, from Lake Erie to the bay of New York; while bells were rung and cannons saluted every stage of that imposing progress. There was much in the effect already produced by the prospective construction of the Erie Canal upon the prosperity of the State, to call for grateful expressions. In one village along its line, 3,000 houses were built in a single year, just before its completion. And yet, compared with the progress of useful improvement since that time, how inferior all this appears! The projector of the Erie Canal perhaps left his home in Orange county, to come to this Capital, in Fulton's

"Clermont," or Fulton's "Car of Neptune," in which he could sail up our majestic river at the fearful rate of five miles an hour! The Governor of this State in 1817, and those who here gathered with him to thank God for the successful progress of useful improvements, had doubtless heard of railways, or tramways as they were called, in the coal mines of England, but they had never seen or heard of a railroad, or a locomotive, or a passenger train. Gas had only just been lighted in a few of the streets of London. Albany was comparatively in darkness. The rapidity and power of the printing presses of to-day would have been inconceivable at that time. The newspaper that contained the proclamation that called the people together, was thrown off from a hand press worked by two men, who were able to produce the marvelous number of two hundred copies per hour, printed on one side only! Those who gathered here in 1817, to give thanks for useful improvements, had, if I am not mistaken, seen no stove, but the foot stove and the ancient Franklin stove; they had never heard the words telegraph or photograph. If they could give thanks sincerely, as we may believe they did, for the improvements in their day which increase the comforts of life, which facilitate intercourse, which diminish crime, which increase knowledge, which drive out selfishness; if they could thank God for these things, how much more may we at this hour!

But once more. The Governor of this State, sixty years ago, closed in effect this, the first proclamation for a general Thanksgiving throughout the Commonwealth, by reminding the people of their "continued enjoyment of peace, liberty and independence." And so, also, we have been reminded by our own Executive that during

the past year "we have been exempt from the scourge of war. In the face of severe threats, public peace and the supremacy of law have been firmly maintained by the courage and good conduct of our own citizens."

The words peace, liberty and independence, were significant words, at the time they were used to indicate reasons for thankfulness. They were significant then, but how much more significant now! The people who gathered in this church in 1817 could appreciate somewhat by contrast the blessings of peace. The war with England, declared in 1812,—that war which for so many years was called "the last war," had only just now closed. Many a one still mourned the loss of some brave soldier or sailor slain. The whole country was then, as now, suffering from the reaction, from the extravagance and unusual production and consumption of a time of war. "The Governor's speech" of that year speaks of "the loss of commercial confidence, and exhibition of fictitious capital, the increase of civil prosecutions, the multiplication of crimes, the injurious enhancement of prices, and the dangerous extension of credit;" it mentions these things then as characteristic of those times. The people of those days knew something of the evil results of war and of the blessing of peace. But how little could they appreciate what we have learned by sad experience, the sorrows, the long drawn calamities, not yet ended, that follow in the train of war; and worst of all in the train of civil war! Yet peace has come, a peace far more blessed by contrast than that our fathers knew. A peace has been granted unto us that our people will not soon surrender. You cannot force the people of this land very soon again into a conflict. Let us thank God for it! There may be conflicts of opinion, and they are not to be feared. They

are to be desired. They stir the atmosphere of public thought. They do great good by the purification they produce in the upper and the lower life of the nation. But the people of this country have exemplified during the past year most remarkably that moderation, that self-control of which I spoke to you a year ago, on a similar occasion to the present. Our people are ready to preserve the peace, even at the sacrifice of what large numbers of them may think to be their political rights. From what untold horrors, unknown as yet in this land, have our people saved themselves by the self-control and self-sacrifice which they have exercised, and force their party leaders to exercise during the past year? Twelve months ago when I stood in this pulpit, I fairly dreaded the progress of the hours that might bring with them inevitable conflict and blood and death. Let us thank God to-day that in His providence, this land is not now once more "drenched in fraternal blood," and the prophecy of the great statesman and orator of Massachusetts twice fulfilled; but, that under Providence, such has been the self-control of our people that the reign of law, without which peace is impossible, has been maintained. For in our own Commonwealth, not only have the people been willing to make political sacrifices for the sake of higher interests, but they have compelled those who would excite serious disorder and run riot, to obey the laws. I may be permitted to say, and echo your sentiments, when I say that under the efficient direction of a most efficient Executive, our people have given another and a most emphatic proof of their ability to *control each other* as well as to control themselves. They have exemplified their belief, their earnest and practical conviction, that liberty without law is license. "Liberty with law is a

fire on the hearth. Liberty without law is a fire on the floor." Oh, how much more do we thank God for to-day, when we thank him for liberty, than our fathers did when they gave thanks for the same blessing! Sixty years ago, millions of slaves darkened the land; and it was a problem which troubled the thoughts and saddened the hearts of the wisest and the best men, North and South; how shall we free our land from this intolerable burden, which, all of them at that time acknowledged to be a curse. Sixty years ago, there were five thousand slaves in the State of New York. Sixty years ago, debtors were shut up in jail. Imprisonment for debt was not abolished in this State till 1831. If the poet Dante was right when, summing up the experience of the Middle ages, he declared that "the human race is in the best condition when it has the greatest degree of liberty;" if one of the strongest thinkers that Germany, monarchical Germany, has ever produced, if Emmanuel Kant could affirm that a republican government is "the only true civil constitution;" then surely we have reason to thank God for liberty even more than our fathers did. For we are thankful to-day for a tested liberty, a tried republican government! not only tried by the progress of a hundred years, but tested by a conflict such as the world had never known. For our liberty is not freedom only—the freedom of the individual, sometimes only wild and lawless, but liberty—organized freedom consistent with law. For a peace and for a liberty of which, comparatively, our fathers were ignorant, we thank God, here and now.

Some of you, dear friends, I dare say, have not felt this year like giving hearty thanks. You have thought of your sorrows, you have thought of your misfortunes;

you have thought of your bereavements and burdens and your trials and your losses. You have thought of the troubles of mind and of body and of estate, that you are called to endure. And it may have seemed to you as if you could not join in these Thanksgiving anthems; you could not unite in these ascriptions of praise; you could hardly offer words of thankful private prayer; it may have seemed to you as if it would have been better to have proclaimed a fast rather than a festival. I confess I have sometimes for myself and for you, sympathized with such feelings. Perhaps we are all inclined to notice our troubles first. The stings of sorrow make themselves felt more than the effusion of blessings. And yet when I have begun to remember my benefits; when I have tried to obey the Psalmist when he tells me "not to forget all his benefits, who forgiveth all thine iniquities, who healeth all thy diseases, who redeemeth thy life from destruction, who crowneth thee with loving kindness and tender mercies;" then my thoughts of a fast begin to vanish, and I soon rejoice to unite in this festival service!

So it may be with us, in our celebration of this day, as it was with the earliest thanksgiving on record in the Colony of Massachusetts. In consequence of destitution and apparently approaching famine, the colonists appointed a fast, but before the day arrived, provisions came to them from Ireland, and the fast was kept as a day of thanksgiving!

And let us not forget that these benefits that we have been considering, which may seem so public, are really private. Each one enters into our individual life. The gift of abundance, the gift of health, the gift of knowledge, the gift of invention, the gift of peace and liberty, are not only for all as a whole, but for each one of us, the men,

the women and their children. They are tokens of our everlasting Father's love, renewed and increased from age to age.

Here, then, in this temple, we reaffirm the faith of the fathers. Some of us worshiped with them here sixty years ago. May the time be far distant, very far distant, when there shall be none here to represent the founders of this church. Most of us were unborn when the first Thanksgiving service was held in this house of prayer. But all of us rejoice here to-day in a like blessed faith.

"Under the shadow of Thy throne,
Thy saints have dwelt secure.
Sufficient is Thine arm alone;
And our defense is sure."

Here to-day, after the passage of more than half a century—nearly two generations—we reaffirm the faith of our fathers, and redeclare the final words of President Griffin, when in this pulpit, he said: "Neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." "Hallelujah. Amen."