

A SERMON

DELIVERED ON

THANKSGIVING DAY,

BY THE

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RECTOR OF ST. JOHN'S PARISH, IN THE CITY OF
WASHINGTON, D. C.

Published by request of the Vestry.

WASHINGTON:
C. ALEXANDER, PRINTER.
1846.

SERMON

In every thing give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.—*I Thessalonians, 5th chap., 18th verse.*

OUR ears and our minds are so accustomed to the enunciation of the great fundamental truths and the great practical precepts of the Gospel, that we become insensible to its wonderful, its divine, its singular excellence. Viewed in its coldest aspect, its philosophical, we do not realize what a heavenly philosophy Christianity is. Here, for instance, is one of the common places of Christianity, a precept which flows as naturally from its principles as water from its fountain; and yet, examine it by the light even of human reason, reflect upon the state of the world and of society when it was announced, contrast it with the precepts of all other systems and every other religion, compare it with the natural dictates of the natural heart, and see how even this simple precept stamps the religion from which it emanates as unearthly and divine. Human philosophy, my brethren, has ever shrunk from the solution of the mysterious problem of human sorrow and suffering, and, therefore, at the very outset, it failed to meet the great question of human life, as it is a mingled web of joys and sorrows. One school of that philosophy taught that pain, suffering, and trial, are simply to be endured with fortitude; another, that they are to be avoided with care, deprecated in every shade and shape; a life

of ease and tranquillity to be sought as the chief good, the great end of existence. Nay, when we come to those who were blessed with the revelation of the Divine will under the earlier dispensations, we find the pains and sorrows of life regarded absolutely as judgments, as punishments from heaven for national or individual transgression. And such is the natural reasoning of the heart. Just as by all these systems, so by the mind of man, there is a line drawn, a gulph existing between what we commonly term the good and the evil of life. For the one we feel naturally that grateful acknowledgments are to be made to the Giver of all good; over the other, as to its origin, permission, or end, rest clouds and darkness. You perceive then, my brethren, the stupendous reach of the Apostle's precept beyond all that man had ever heard or thought before: "In every thing give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you;" yes, the will of God in Christ Jesus and none else! The revelation of God in Christ has thrown light not only on the world beyond the grave, but upon the whole mingled tissue of the life that now is. And how has it done this? By showing that for the redemption of the human race, for their extrication from the awful gulph of doubt and darkness and sin in which they were plunged, the Son of God took upon him our nature—that even in the Son of God that nature was perfected by suffering—that it was in the period of his *humiliation and suffering* that consolation came to him from heaven. When He submitted to the baptism of John, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Ghost descended upon him; when He had

endured the temptation in the wilderness, angels came and ministered unto him; in His agony in the garden, the same heavenly ministers succored Him; when he had hung on the cross and tasted the bitterness of death, it was by this last *suffering* that he won power to burst the barriers of the sepulchre, and rose triumphant over death, and ascended to take possession of a throne won by suffering, and to reign over a kingdom in which suffering and trial endured in Him and for Him, are to lead to the same glory. Jesus Christ was in His person a type of His religion; He was a type of the sorrows and blessings which are to come upon every member of that Body of which He is the living and glorious Head. His religion, therefore, addresses itself to the poor, to the weary and heavy laden, offering them peace and comfort and a kingdom which shall never end; hence it is, that the Apostle speaks elsewhere of "*re-joicing* in tribulation;" and, in the text, where he is addressing a peculiarly tried and suffering people, suffering for the very name of Christ, "In every thing give thanks." *In every thing*, because Christianity has revealed what existence is in the aggregate, it has shown how the joys and sorrows of life may be equally brought to bear on the great end of this life, the life everlasting; because every trial which comes to a Christian man, comes with this message from Christ on his mediatorial throne, "suffer with me, and you shall triumph with me, suffer with me and you shall be consoled with me, consoled here by my spirit, consoled hereafter by being with me where I am." Heavenly philosophy indeed! which teaches me to look upon every thing, every trial, every

joy, every blessing, every privation, every thing but sin, as a gift of God, and, therefore, to be received with thanksgiving. And this, I repeat, is the true philosophy of human life; read the book of life with any other interpreter, tread the labyrinth of life with any other clue, and where will it lead you, what will you learn from it? Most appropriate, then, is the Apostle's exhortation as the theme of our meditation to-day; for, whether we regard ourselves nationally or individually, for us has life presented this chequered scene of lights and shadows, successes and reverses, trials and enjoyments.

As a nation, full has been the measure of blessing; the valleys have stood thick with corn, health, prosperity, domestic tranquillity, continued and astonishing development of internal resources, increased facility of communication, and new channels of national wealth opened with the other countries of the world, the blessings of education widely extended, new fields of Christian benevolence developed and cultivated—How glowing a picture, yet how true! But, in this picture there are also shadows, deep, deep shadows. Fulness of bread has worked its ordinary and deadly effect upon the wickedness of man; rampant violence, deeds of blood, a daring effrontery of vice have marked the past year beyond any within the period of this nation's history. I fear, my brethren, an examination will only prove too clearly that within the last twelve months there have been as many acts of wanton violence committed within the bounds of the United States, as the whole criminal records of the densely populated countries of Europe

could testify concerning them. How humiliating to every thinking and feeling mind are these blots upon our national history! From this very humiliation may spring our blessing or our bane, just as we are conformed or not to "the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning us," even in this very visitation.

A blessing—for what do these scenes of lawlessness and bloodshed teach us? They teach us the blessings of law, of order, of religion; they teach us who are "sitting under our vine and under our fig tree, with none to make us afraid," to prize and to preserve that gentle sway which guarantees such privileges; they tell us the fearful necessity of dependence on that Power which alone can control the unruly wills and affections of sinful men, for we see that just where the presence of the visible church is faintest, its influence less dominant, there the unruly will of man has produced these deadly fruits. We are living, my brethren, in a country governed by majorities, a country wherein popular will is supposed sooner or later to exert its sway. In the present position of this country, the measureless majority of its people have some stake in the community, it is in the truest sense of the word a *commonwealth*, nine out of ten of our vast population possess something which a revolution, a general scramble, any material change, in short, in the existing state of things would seriously affect, if not totally destroy. Is it not to be hoped, then, that when this evil infection is seen spreading, the very conspicuousness of the evil will incite men to think gravely of its cause, to seek the remedy, to uphold the arm of the law, to sustain and diffuse the influences of religion?

If so, shall we not find cause to be thankful to God even for our very humiliation, if from it should be educes so great, so permanent a good.

But I spoke of a bane as well as a blessing, which might spring from this very source. Majorities, masses, even of thinking men, are not logical, reasoning in their conclusions; they jump to results. Let the idea once get possession of the minds of that vast majority of this people, who have something to keep, something to lose, that the power of existing laws and institutions is not sufficient to guarantee to them the preservation of that valued thing. They will not reason on faults of administrations, or faults of the governed, who will not suffer the governors to govern. They will spring to the conclusion that there is a positive incompatibility between so wide a civil liberty as we now possess, and general order and tranquillity, or even national existence. This impression, with regard to ourselves, is rapidly spreading in other lands; it is put forth boldly, resting on the very ground of these known acts of violence and vice which stand out in relief from the general plane of our prosperity. These foreign assailants see, and make others see the one, while they cannot or will not see the other. This opinion is rapidly forming itself into a maxim, iterated and reiterated, coming back to us in various forms. It may seize upon the public mind through a mistaken instinct of self-preservation. If once it should, the knell of civil liberty is rung for us and for the world for ages yet to come. For, what is the lesson taught by the whole history of the world? That, with regard to political institutions, extremes

meet; and moreover, that the extremes do not ordinarily spring at once and openly into existence, but by the very preservation of external forms, the most absolute change is effected in every element which those forms represent. I certainly cannot imagine that within any given period, the people of this country could ever consent to live under *the names or forms* of despotic authority. But I *can* imagine a period, and that not a remote one, when, to hold on to realities, men will disregard theories; when, to preserve house and lands, and wife and child, and life itself, from the lawless hands that are ravaging without restraint, any amount of power will be entrusted without those embarrassing restrictions which are found, in practice, only to protect the wrongdoer, and afford him doors of escape from the merited penalties of justice. God grant, my brethren, that my apprehensions may all prove illusory! My daily prayer to God is, that my country may be blessed hereafter as she has been blessed hitherto; that we may stay as we are, and prosper as we are. But I have seen enough of all sorts and conditions of men, of all ranks, of all intelligence, of all parties, to know that there is a growing mistrust not in the abstract excellence of our institutions, but in the ability to exercise the powers conferred by these institutions for the very end for which the institutions were framed and the powers conferred.

I have spoken of one of the shadows with which the providence of God has suffered the will of man to obscure the fair picture of our national prosperity. There is another deeper, denser shade—a lurid cloud—which envelopes the whole land in gloom; which has sent

forth its winged messengers of death ; which causes to mingle with the hymn of a nation's thanksgiving, the mother's agony for her beautiful and brave, the widow's moan, the orphan's wailing, the patient, silent sorrow of the father who, having given his son to his country, and doubtless often thought of such an end, finds it none the less bitter because it had not been unforeseen.

War has come upon us—that curse and that scourge of nations—yes—a curse and a scourge, come how it will, and end as it may. In any and in every war, treasure is spent in blighting, which might have been bestowed in blessing. That precious thing, the life of man, is jeopardized and lost with as little heed as the meanest insect we tread beneath our feet ; and souls which are to live forever, go to the eternal audit fresh from the din of combat, from the oaths of passion, from the excitements of a life which has left no time for thought, from the horrors of a death unblessed by one prayer to God. But the evils of war are more widely spread than even these. No nation issues from a war as it entered upon it. The passions excited, the vices engendered, the thirst of conquest, the jealousies, the greediness of gain, the temptations offered to those least able to resist them, and who never do resist them, to grow rich or great or powerful, all leave a lasting stain which it is the work of generations to expunge. How serious, then, the responsibility of plunging a nation into war ! how deep, how obvious should be the necessity, before so awful a calamity is induced ! Of that responsibility, as now assumed, or that necessity, as now existing, this is not the place to pass judgment,

nor are mine the lips which should pronounce a verdict. My proper province is, to deprecate the calamity when it menaces, to mourn for my people's sins and my own when it comes, to pray that it may pass away. I believe, my brethren, that it is the wish of those who rule this nation, that it should pass away ; that in the council and in the field, every effort, both of head and hand, is directed to that result. God grant that it may be so ! When last we met for an annual thanksgiving, this evil threatened us from another quarter. I then said that, if the voice of England and America could be heard, that voice would cry, Peace ! Has it not proved so ? I am very sure that this day the prayers of multitudes ascend to heaven for *peace*, and that the will of this nation, could it find utterance in one word and voice, would be, *peace, peace !*

But may we not find cause, even amid this dreadful visitation, to illustrate the apostolic maxim of the text—“ In every thing, give thanks ? ” There are causes for thankfulness in the past incidents of this war. Its series of victories we may be thankful for, because every victory brings nearer the desired result. Nor should any American be insensible to the glory which the calm courage and discipline of those who have been sent to fight the country's battles, reflect upon the national character. Let us glory, especially, my brethren, that those brave men have shown themselves as humane as they are brave. The noblest trophy of those well-fought fields is the story of the soldiers of America succoring the wounded foe amid the very din and excitement of the battle. We read with equal pride and pleasure, too,

the well-told narratives of those eventful scenes, not because they bear record that these men were brave, (for brave we knew they were,) but because they give their involuntary and unerring testimony of ready intelligence, generous sympathies, patient endurance, and civil and domestic virtues—a testimony which will teach this nation one great and useful lesson—that this great branch of the national service is not a mere expensive appendage, useful at best to meet rare emergencies; but that the very training which has made these men act so well, so wisely where they are, is not a happy accident, but the result of a system which elicits qualities that adorn and dignify, and bind in closest union, the various elements that constitute our national and social polity.

The great blessings, however, which, under God, we may hope for from this war, is, that it will teach this nation a memorable lesson of the blessing, the value of peace. In this aspect, we may regard *this* war as relatively a blessing. We have entered into a contest with a nation close at hand, enfeebled by intestine division, ill prepared, even when most united, to cope with us; and yet, in this war but of yesterday, what sums have been expended, what blood has been shed! A generation had grown up, among whom war was a thing of history—a thing to be talked about—a subject which offered a fine field to very empty heads and vamping tongues. It has now come to be something that is felt and known; and yet felt and known in that degree which, while it inflicts the least suffering that the visitation can bring with it, has yet given a very substantial experience of what war is, and a more vivid estimate of

what it might be. I think, my brethren, that this is something to be thankful for. Let me not be understood, for one moment, as admitting that such a lesson will be, or can be drawn by this nation from this or any war, as will quench one spark of sensibility to the national honor, as will induce one hour's submission to intrusion upon the nation's real rights or dignity. I believe that any, even the widest division of party; the most embittered personal rivalries or animosities, would sink into annihilation before any real aggression upon what this nation deemed its rights and honor. One voice, one hand, one heart! Such would be the *national* characteristic of such a struggle—a fearful one if ever it should come. But have we not had recent experience that there was a spirit working in the land, heady, tumultuous, crying out for war, “e’en at the sound itself had made,” war for a wilderness, war for a shadow? Whither might this spirit have hurried us? Into what fearful changes, what disruption of ties that now bind us in blessed and imposing union? Yes, my brethren, though bitterness and desolation may be the portion of many a sorrowing heart throughout this land, yet blessed be God for this visitation, if it teach this people the misery of any war, the sinfulness of an unnecessary war, the deep damnation sooner or later to be visited in the retributive justice of God, for an unjust or aggressive war. My earnest prayer is, that we may be borne honorably and successfully through our present contest, to the great object, I am persuaded, of those who are directing the nation's energies—a substantial and enduring peace. If other, greater struggles should come,

my firm confidence in the result is founded on the trust that, taught betimes how great a scourge is war, that struggle will be a necessary one, and therefore one which will unite the hands and hearts and prayers of every Christian man throughout this land; yes, every *Christian* man; for there are times and seasons when it is as much the duty of a Christian man to fight and die for his country, as to live and labor and pray for it.

And now, my beloved brethren, suffer me, ere I close, to make the very obvious application of the text to your circumstances individually. For each one of you, in some form or other, has your past year's life been "like an April day—alternate cloud and sunshine." You know best what blessings God has showered on your path. The very sorrows and sufferings of others may have taught you what treasures He is leaving to you on earth. God grant that you may realize how entirely they depend on Him and come from Him!

There may be here this day some creature whom God has raised from the bed of sickness, brought to this house of God with the light of life still beaming, and the light of the life eternal still proffered. The shadows of the grave, which seemed so near—near, perchance, when no rod and staff had as yet been found, have passed for a time—a time for thought, a time for prayer, a time for repentance. Or, it may be, that the very hour of sickness and pain did its gracious and intended work: the heart has been made serious, has been softened, subdued. Oh! what a hymn of praise should come from such a heart this day! Remember that the truest acknowledgment is not that of the lips, but of the

heart believing unto salvation, of the life hid in Christ. Remember how near eternity is; you have been solemnly taught it. Trample not this pearl of God's providential teaching under feet which rush from the very couch where God made Himself known, to tread with renewed eagerness the paths of this world's pleasures, cares, or vice. Ah, blessings! how can I number all your blessings! The children whom God has given to fill your hearts and arms; the food and raiment, enough and to spare; the means to lessen human suffering; the opportunity to soothe human sorrow; the Word, the church, the sacraments of God. For all these things, give thanks.

For many of you, my brethren, I know what sorrows have clouded the way of life. For some, there has been poverty and privation: oh! may it read to all the lesson which I know it has taught to some; the mind which was in Him who himself "became poor that by His poverty he might make us rich," those truly rich to whom the poverty of this world had taught that poverty of spirit which inherits the Kingdom of Heaven. Remember the saying of the Lord Jesus himself, "how hardly shall they that trust in riches enter into the Kingdom of Heaven," and bless God that you are saved from all temptation to trust in them. Believe me, it is a subtle temptation: a temptation which even he who feeds the hungry, and clothes the naked, and names the name of Christ, does not always resist.

And you, my brethren, on whom sorrow has come in yet acuter, heavier forms, more sudden visitations! Ah! this has been a fearful year, a year unexampled in

my ministry and memory for such *messages from Heaven*; for they are such, my brethren; they are *angel's* visits, though neither "few nor far between," which tell you that the loved and treasured thing which has been taken away, has left a place to be filled by a better treasure which "can never be taken away from you." Hearts which have been entangled in the web of this world's affections are left without the covering they had woven around themselves, that in the nakedness and chill of earthly desolation they may feel after the "house not made with hands." Hands which have lost their hold on the stay and prop which carried them on so bravely through the world, are thereby taught to grasp the "anchor sure and steadfast that entereth within the veil."

Brethren, these awful lessons are not for the sorrowing alone, they are for all. Man of the world, whose friend and companion has been smitten at your side, think on eternity and God! Ye who are rejoicing in your youth! I have laid in the grave, before your eyes, a creature as young and rejoicing as yourselves.

Oh! if God give us grace to lay these things to heart, then shall we indeed respond to the Apostle's words, "in every thing give thanks." Our joys and our sorrows shall equally elicit the thanksgiving for the mercy of Heaven, which, in every varied form, in every light and every shadow of life, is making known "the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning us."