

Christmas Evans, 1766-1838.

THE preaching of the Gospel has been a primary factor in the development of modern Wales and, despite the changes of the last few decades, it is true to say that instructed people gratefully acknowledge the fact.

There were some eminent preachers in the land during the seventeenth century, and we owe them much, but it was the great Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century which established the preacher in his place of national regard. Wales, for the most part, became decidedly Protestant and Nonconformist, and henceforth, and for long years, the pulpit became the place of power in practically every town, village and district. The preacher's holy office was honoured beyond any other and its occupancy became a coveted privilege, accorded only to those whose gifts and consecration gave ground for believing them to be called of God. Every denomination had its good preachers and an occasional great preacher, whose fame and influence, transcending local and denominational barriers or restrictions, spread throughout the country, discussed and beloved and revered.

A truly great preacher is one of God's choicest gifts to the Christian Church, and perhaps (as someone has suggested) His last resort in His endeavour to save His people from their sins and to establish them in the blessedness of the Faith. Such a preacher was Daniel Rowlands (1730-1790), of Llangeitho, Cardiganshire—in my judgment the greatest of all the great preachers of Wales, a preacher so great that I know of none greater anywhere. But these assessments of "great," "greater," "greatest" must always be made with diffidence rather than with confidence.

Towards the close of the eighteenth and during the early decades of the nineteenth century Wales was blessed with three outstanding preachers—an indissoluble triumvirate: John Elias of Anglesey (1774-1841), a Calvinistic Methodist; Christmas Evans (1766-1838), a Baptist; and William Williams of Wern (1781-1840), an Independent. All three were men of national reputation, honoured throughout religious Wales, and even by the irreligious. Each had his own distinctive gifts and excellence and, in mutual appreciation and friendship, they wrought with all their splendid might for the progress of the Gospel in the land. Of these three it is fair to say that Christmas Evans was the best known, and to that extent the most influential. Perhaps he is the best known, to fame, of all Welsh preachers. He has had English biographers; he published a

number of booklets and many sermons; some of his sermons have been translated into English, one of them (on the text Romans v. 15) being included, with a notice and portrait, in Dr. Henry C. Fish's *Masterpieces of Pulpit Eloquence*. His fame has travelled far beyond Wales and the British Isles, and his career is said to have given a powerful stimulus to the American Evangelist, D. L. Moody.

It was at Esgairwen, in the parish of Llandyssul, Cardiganshire, that this celebrated man was born, on Christmas Day, 1766. His parents were respectable (his father being a shoemaker and his mother a farmer's daughter), but too poor to send him to school. He lost his father when nine years of age, after which he was sent to live on a Carmarthenshire farm with an uncle who promised to look after him in return for such "odd jobs" as a boy could do. "Seldom," said Christmas Evans afterwards, "could I find in the whole range of this bad world a more wicked example, and a more ungodly man." Six years later he returned to his native county and found work, here and there, as a farm-hand. He had been an imaginative child, and some early impressions of a serious kind were not wholly obliterated by the harsh experience of subsequent years. Indeed, they were strengthened by some boyish misadventures which might easily have cost him his life. They helped to keep alive a sense of "religion," and they fostered a sort of conviction that he was destined for something worth while.

When Christmas Evans was about eighteen years of age a religious awakening stirred the youth of the neighbourhood and he was led to attend, and then to join, the historic "Presbyterian" Church of Llwynrhydowen. The minister of this Church was the Rev. David Davies, of Castell Hywel, one of the best classical scholars of contemporary Wales and a distinguished bard, whose Welsh translation of Gray's *Elegy* is said by competent judges to be at least worthy of the stately original. He was also eminent as a schoolmaster, and many of his pupils went straight into the ministry of the Established Church—too many for the liking of Bishop Horsley, who announced that he would ordain no more. Mr. Davies's doctrinal views, however, and those of the Church as a whole, were, or tended towards, what we now call Unitarianism.

Up to this time Christmas Evans was unable to read—it seems incredible—but quickened religious aspirations, in his case as with others in every generation, resulted in a longing for knowledge and education. Few of his associates could read, and a class was formed for their general benefit. There and thus he was initiated into the inexhaustible riches of the Welsh Bible. He seems also to have acquired a little English. Mr. Davies took

a new interest in him and admitted him into his school or "academy," where he "went through the Latin Grammar." This was all the formal schooling that he ever received, and it lasted for only six months. He was too poor to stay longer.

Soon after joining the Church he was invited to take a public part in cottage prayer-meetings, and this led to his being urged to say a few words of exhortation, "to which," he says, "I felt a strong inclination, though I was in utter ignorance of spiritual things." So it was in a country cottage that Christmas Evans preached his first sermon. Eager and earnest as he was, however, his understanding of the Gospel was seriously defective. The Lord Jesus Christ is possessed of a grace and a redemptive power of which he was then unaware. Even so, he was, to the discerning, more than just a young man of promise. There was in him, and in his preaching, the presage of future eminence, perhaps of greatness.

After leaving "school" he went into Herefordshire as a worker in the harvest-fields, presumably in order to earn sufficient money for another term later on. It proved to be an unhappy experience, and it might have been disastrous. If it improved his English it retarded the growth of his spiritual life. He found his field-companions uncongenial and he took no part in behaviour that he considered wrong. This aroused their resentment, and one night five or six of them attacked and beat him unmercifully, leaving him as dead. It was then that he lost his right eye. "He has only one eye," said someone to Robert Hall. "Yes, sir," he replied, "but that's a piercer; an eye, sir, that could light an army through a wilderness on a dark night." On another occasion Hall called it "more properly a brilliant star, it shone like Venus." He counted Christmas Evans "the tallest, the stoutest and the greatest man he ever saw."

He resumed his old life at Llwynrhydowen, working on a farm, but he was restless and frequently depressed, distrustful of his condition in the sight of God. He became unsettled about Baptism and failed to find New Testament precedent or sanction for infant baptism, although he searched diligently. On the other hand, he found plenty of plain evidence for Believers' Baptism by immersion, and conviction at length came to him and held him fast. He was baptised in the river Duar, in 1788, by the Rev. Timothy Thomas, whose Church at Aberduar, in the parish of Llanybyther, Carmarthenshire, he joined. Timothy Thomas was himself a man of considerable eminence, and it meant a great deal to "sit under" his ministry.

The atmosphere at Aberduar was charged with an unwonted warmth and fervour. The services were hearty to the pitch of enthusiasm, and the rather chilled spirit of Christmas Evans

reacted to the glow. The Person of the Lord Jesus Christ became more precious and glorious in his eyes, and he was led into clearer perception of the potent efficacies of His Cross. The evangelical preaching that he heard at Aberduar, and elsewhere, at this time, was blessed of God to his soul; his own preaching acquired a deeper, stronger spirituality.

In 1789 he attended a Baptist Association at Maesyberllan, near Brecon, and there he met some preachers from North Wales who spoke to him of its needs and opportunities. He accepted their invitation to return with them, and so the way opened to his first pastorate—that of the group of little Churches in the Lleyn peninsula, Caernarvonshire. He was ordained at Salem, Tyndonen. In that same year (1789) on October 23rd, he married Miss Catherine Jones, a young and devout member of his Church. She was an admirable woman, and he owed a great deal to her loving care.

His ministry in Lleyn was productive of much that was distinctive of his subsequent career. The living was meagre and his toil was excessive (he often preached five times, and tramped twenty miles on Sundays), but he survived all the strain and grew steadily towards the fullness of his proper stature. He lost much of his old restlessness and depression, and found inward assurance in the Faith that he was preaching with such obvious acceptance to his increasing congregations. His ministry was being abundantly blessed. He changed the style of his preaching, giving it a more distinctive and individual character, mainly through the influence of the Rev. Robert Roberts, of Clynnog, Caernarvonshire, a celebrated and seraphic Calvinistic Methodist preacher. After listening to him—intense, vivid, picturesque, dramatic—he decided that he, too, could preach like that, and he determined henceforth to be himself and to use his imagination and his gift for dramatic portrayal. There is a sense in which we owe the Christmas Evans of history to Robert Roberts, Clynnog.

Nor did he confine his ministry to Lleyn. He undertook a preaching journey as far as Pembrokeshire, travelling down through West Wales and preaching daily, or frequently, on the way. Great crowds attended his ministry, often thronging the chapels, and many people followed him for miles, from one service to another. It was prophetic of still greater things to come.

On Christmas Day, 1792, Christmas Evans left for Anglesey, deeply regretted in Lleyn but convinced of Divine guidance, and there he was to settle for nearly thirty-four laborious but beneficent and fruitful years. It is as "Christmas Evans of Anglesey" that he became known to Wales at large.

The Baptist movement in Anglesey owed much to South Wales enterprise, and for a time it made substantial progress. Then troubles arose within the fellowship, and the result was that Christmas Evans had to face a crop of difficulties which would have deterred a man of less faith and courage. There was one Church, meeting at Llangefni, with a chapel at Capel Newydd and eight preaching stations in different parts of the island. When he left Anglesey these had increased to twenty, and there were twenty-eight preachers, ordained and lay. He was the "Baptist Bishop," with superintendence over all branches, and he lived at Cildwrn, Llangefni. For many years his "salary" was only £17 per annum; never more than £30. But there were, and must have been, some "extras." Out of his poverty he contributed regularly and generously to the B.M.S. and to other "good causes," including Abergavenny Academy.

It is significant that, after his arrival, he arranged for a day of humiliation (with prayer and fasting) before God, at Llanerchymedd. It was a blessed day and it led to further blessings.

In 1793 Christmas Evans made a second preaching tour into South Wales, and a third the following year. It was during this third visit (1794) that he leapt into denominational prominence. He had been invited to preach at an Association in Felinfoel, Llanelly, Caermarthenshire—involving a journey of two hundred miles—and his sermon on that occasion, on the Prodigal Son, created such an impression upon the assembled thousands that his name spread far and wide. He became, almost at once, the leading preacher of his denomination, and thereafter no Welsh Association was considered complete without him. Year after year, to the close of his life, he was an acknowledged "master" in those great assemblies which have been such a notable feature of Welsh religion. Held in the open air, with a platform for the preachers, they were attended by thousands of people gathered from a wide area. They offered a grand opportunity for Gospel preaching and, by the grace of God, those opportunities were often greatly used. Wales owes much to these open-air assemblies. They are still held, and popular, in some parts of the country, but their "glory" is not what it was.

We cannot follow in detail the course of Christmas Evans's life during his Anglesey ministry. He drank deeply of sorrow as well as of joy—"the care of all the Churches" weighed upon mind and heart. His life was exceedingly hard, with little relief from the pressure of grim poverty, taxing faith in the providence of God. There was the bleak period of the Sandemanian (or Glassite) heresy, and then doctrinal controversy upon such matters as Calvinism and the extent of the efficacy of the Atonement.

ment. And always there seemed to be the burden of Chapel-debts (consequent upon necessary Chapel-building), which devolved upon him as upon nobody else, and which he so loyally shouldered and strove to discharge. But he steadfastly pursued his task, and, by the grace of God, the Churches increased and multiplied, and he had many periods of inward peace and blessedness. It was a truly strenuous life of "plain living and high thinking," with his available time methodically planned and conscientiously used in prayer, study, writing, preaching, meetings of all sorts and frequent travelling, mostly on foot. Certainly he had banished idleness from his bones. The marvel is that he did so much so well and for so long.

In 1823 he lost his devout and devoted wife—a disabling loss.

In 1826 he accepted an invitation to the pastorate of Tony-felin, Caerphilly, Glamorgan, and there again, as before in Anglesey, his first call to the Church was a summons to prayer, that they unite in earnest entreaty for the blessing of God. His preaching at Caerphilly attained to a power perhaps unequalled in his past ministry, and he had the joy of baptising and receiving into Church fellowship at least one hundred and forty people during his brief stay. Christmas Evans considered his two years there as among the happiest years of his life. It was his first experience of a single charge with the duty of preaching to the same congregation Sunday after Sunday, and it says much for the vigour and fertility of his mind that, at sixty years of age, he was able to meet the situation so successfully.

During this period, too, he married again. His second wife was his housekeeper, Mary Jones, of the old Anglesey days. She survived him and I understand that, in her old age, and out of regard for the memory of Christmas Evans, C. H. Spurgeon secured for her a small allowance from an English Baptist fund.

In 1828 he removed to the Tabernacle, Cardiff, and in 1832 he returned to North Wales, undertaking the onerous pastorate of Caersalem, Caernarvon. Once more he found himself saddled with a crushing Chapel-debt, and it was in a final effort to clear it that he died. After collecting what he could in North Wales he turned, in the spring of 1838, to the Churches of South Wales, making his last "sacrifice for the cause of the Redeemer." He sent a moving "exhortation" beforehand, explaining the situation at Caernarvon, and soliciting their sympathy and support. His itinerary, with its list of "publications," is on record. It was an arduous and a hazardous undertaking for an old and enfeebled man in precarious health, committing him to "journeyings oft" and long, and to preaching several times a week over the period May 1st to September 30th. His wife and a friend accompanied him, and he was gladdened by the

warmth of his welcome. Arriving in Monmouthshire, he proceeded to the Association meetings at Argoed, and there he preached his last Association sermon, from the text Ephesians ii. 8. Illness detained him at Tredegar for a week, after which he revisited his old Churches at Caerphilly and Cardiff. He was in Swansea by July 14th (a Saturday), and on the Sunday he preached in Bethesda Welsh Baptist Chapel, both morning and evening. The following evening (Monday) he was at Mount Pleasant, Swansea, where he preached an English sermon from the text: "And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name" (St. Luke xxiv. 47). It is said that he preached "very happily" but, when he was descending from the pulpit, he was heard to declare: "This is my last sermon." So it proved, whatever he may have meant by the words. That night he was taken ill, and at 4 o'clock on Thursday morning, July 19th, 1838, he passed hence to his adored Saviour. Shortly before he died he thanked his host, the Rev. Daniel Davies, of Bethesda, Swansea, for his kindness, and then he said to him and to his fellow-traveller from North Wales (Mr. John Hughes, Ruthin): "I am leaving you; for fifty-three years have I laboured in the sanctuary and my comfort and confidence on this solemn occasion are that I never laboured without blood in the vessel. Preach Christ to the people, dear brethren. If you look upon me as I appear in my preaching, I am lost for ever; but if you look at me in Christ, I am in heaven and am saved." He spoke, of course, in Welsh, and then he triumphantly recited a verse from a grand Welsh hymn, after which, as if stepping into some heavenly chariot, he waved his hand and called out: "Good-bye, drive on." So died Christmas Evans.

The funeral, on the following Monday, July 23rd, was attended by a vast concourse of people, and his body was reverently laid to rest in the burial-ground attached to Bethesda Chapel. The news of his passing plunged the whole of religious Wales into sorrow, and crowded memorial services throughout the length and breadth of the land bore testimony to the honour in which he was held. Men knew that Wales had lost one of the noblest and most gifted of her sons.

It seems safe to prophesy that his fame is undying; it is quite certain that "he, being dead, yet speaketh." The Welsh Baptist Union has recently celebrated, in a worthy way, the centenary of his death, and it is fitting that the celebrations should have been held when the Union met, for this year's Assembly, at Caernarvon.

The foregoing narrative of the course of his life may serve to show, at least in some measure, the kind of man Christmas Evans was, but something should be attempted in the nature of

a survey, or perhaps an estimate, with an extract from one of his sermons by way of illustration.

His portrait was painted at least twice (one of them used to hang in Bristol Baptist College; I hope it is there still) and prints have been numerous. In his prime he was a big and robust man, of an impressive appearance, five feet eleven inches in height. His face (of a ruddy complexion) was open and friendly, with a suggestion of humour, and domed with a fine forehead, high and full. His one eye was large and lustrous, and prominently set in its socket. His voice, we are told, was strong rather than rich and melodious, but when his feelings were deeply stirred (and he was truly a man of warm and generous heart) it acquired a tone of sweet and moving pathos. Dramatic though he was in his preaching, there seems to have been little or no action or bodily movement, hardly more than a simple stretching forth of the hand, now and then. He had no "hwyl," as that term is generally understood, but at the height of inspiration his speech had a certain rhythmical intonation, quite individual and characteristic. On such occasions he would speak very fast and with an apparently irresistible momentum.

Christmas Evans's early disadvantages were too many and too prolonged, and his later opportunities were too few and limited, to allow of his becoming a "scholar" in the more technical sense, but it would be a mistake to suppose him an ill-educated man. On the contrary, we must call him an educated man. The historian Gibbon said that he had received two educations: one which others had given to him, and one which he had given to himself, and that of these two, the latter was by far the more important. Christmas Evans's formal education—his "schooling"—lasted for only six months, but thereafter (more especially after his settlement in Lleyn in 1789), to the end of his life, he was assiduous in self-culture. As Matthew Arnold reminded his generation, the instruments of culture are three: reading, observation and reflection (though not necessarily in that order). Christmas Evans never possessed a large library, and never had easy access to one, but he hungered for knowledge and we may say of him, as Alexander Whyte said of himself, that he read "like a famished wolf." He read constantly, at home and away from home, and although his circumstances restricted the range of his reading they strengthened its intensity. It *may* be better to make the most of a few good books than to read a larger number in a less thorough fashion. The staple of his reading was the Welsh Bible, and such "divinity" as John Owen, and he went to John Gill and others for his Biblical exposition. He rated Robert Haldane's *Romans* among the very best commentaries that he knew, earnestly recommending it to all

ministers, and he liked the commentaries of the American scholar, Moses Stuart. The writings of Andrew Fuller modified the rigidity of his earlier Calvinism, and he was very appreciative of the *Essays* of John Foster. In old age, when health was poor and his sight seriously affected, he read James Beattie's once-celebrated *Essay on Truth* and followed with eager attention the course of his argument against the scepticism of David Hume. As we should expect, he was a great lover, and a diligent student of John Bunyan; and he was familiar with the poetry of Milton and Young, and still more familiar with the Welsh hymns and songs of William Williams of Pantycelyn. He was very much interested in men and in great events, and he read as widely as he could in History and Biography. He knew a good deal of the literature of Wales (mostly, I suppose, its religious literature) and the style of his later writings is that of the cultivated and sensitive student. Nor must we forget that he achieved a working knowledge of Latin, Greek and Hebrew. For his Hebrew and his New Testament Greek he seems to have depended upon the now-forgotten but once-excellent *Lexicons* of John Parkhurst.

He lived in a country of magnificent beauty, romantic history and long cultural traditions, whose people had recently passed through a transforming religious experience. This country he knew thoroughly, and its people (with their wide variety of types) he knew intimately. He had been everywhere, north, south, east and west, on foot, on horseback and in a "gig," and as he travelled he had all sorts of experiences. He had an alert and sensitive mind and there was little that escaped his open and observant eye.

Reading and observation, together with experience, combined to provide him with abundant material for reflection, to which he gave long periods of time, not least when quietly travelling, often alone, through the spacious solitudes of the country. So he grew, and steadily matured, into his splendid stature of a man—not indeed a finished and accurate scholar, not perhaps even a learned man, but certainly a well-informed man, whose mind had been cultivated to become the capable instrument of his genius.

His brightest talent was his *imagination*, and this he possessed to a degree truly amounting to genius. Herein he has been compared with Milton, Bunyan and Jean Paul Richter. Each of these comparisons has a measure of aptness, but his closest affinities are with Bunyan. He had a copious vocabulary, readily subservient to his will and purpose. He was a master of picturesque description and of dramatic representation, and his allegories and parables were of an intense human interest. His

hearers were made to realise that his figures and personifications had a direct relation to themselves. If it is objected that his fancies are sometimes extravagant and "riotous," it may be urged in reply that he was a great popular preacher and that they occasioned no difficulty to the common people. His burning earnestness and their own absorbing interest won and held an exclusive attention to the truth alone.

But the essential elements of his power as a preacher have still to be mentioned—his unshakable conviction of the truth and urgency of the Christian Gospel, and the reality and depth of his personal piety. He was very sure about man's desperate need of a Saviour, and he was equally sure of the power of Jesus Christ to "save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him." He delighted to proclaim and propound this best of all "good news." His personal piety was evidenced everywhere and in all company, but without parade, and he was pre-eminently a man of prayer, strict, methodical and eager—for himself, for others, for his Churches, and for the progress of the Gospel. The following prayer was found in the book of his last preaching engagements: "O Lord, give me Thy desire on this journey, for Thy Name's sake. 1. Peace in Christ. 2. The comfort of love. 3. To feel the bowels of compassion towards my brethren in the denomination to which I belong. 4. The fellowship of the Spirit. Amen. I desire also that my sermons while I preach them increase as the five loaves and two fishes. Amen—C.E." No one can read the accounts of his Covenants with God without being himself searched in heart. Truly this man was a *good* minister of Jesus Christ.

In the course of his strenuous life, Christmas Evans found (or made) time to write, and the output of his pen was considerable, varied, and valuable—letters, articles, expositions and sermons. Mostly sermons. He is the most literary of all the great preachers of Wales. His *Works* were gathered together and edited by the late Dr. Owen Davies, Caernarvon, and published in three substantial volumes (over 2,000 pages) in 1898. They are indispensable to the student of Christmas Evans.

Some of his sermons have been translated into English, but they are not now easily accessible. The following extract from a famous sermon (belonging, apparently, to the period of his ministry at Caerphilly), based on the text, 1 Timothy iii. 16, is perhaps fairly representative. The preacher is considering the evidences for our Lord's resurrection, among which he includes the witness of the soldiers when they had returned to the high priests and rulers after watching the grave:—

"Behold, while we were on the watch, and about the dawn of the day, a great earthquake, like unto the one that took place

on Friday afternoon, *when He* died! and we all fell powerless to the ground. Looking up, we saw an angel in a white robe, his eyes like the lightning, so vivid and piercing that the mightiest armies of Caesar would fain have escaped from them. We, not able to bear this sight, were obliged to look down at once. We endeavoured again to raise our eyes, and we beheld One coming out of the grave, passing by the angel, who now sat upon the removed stone, arrayed in such triumphant majesty that the earth never witnessed such a sight before—yes, HE WAS LIKE UNTO THE SON OF GOD!’ ‘What became of the angel?’ ‘Oh, a legion of them came down; and one of them, very fair, like a young man, entered the grave, and sat where the head of Jesus had lain; and immediately another also, looking fair and beautiful, sat where His feet had rested.’ ‘And did the angels say nothing to you?’ ‘No, but they looked with eyes of lightning.’ ‘Saw you not (His friends) the women?’ ‘Oh, yes, they came there; but He had left the tomb before their arrival.’ ‘Talked the angels to them?’ ‘Yes; they seemed to be of one family, and most intimately acquainted with each other.’ ‘Do you remember anything of the conversation?’ ‘Yes. “Fear you not. Let the Pharisees and Darkness fear to-day. You seek Jesus? He is not here; for He is risen indeed. He is alive and lives for ever; He is gone before you into Galilee.” We heard one angel say, “Come, see the place where the Lord lay.” Another angel addressed a woman called Mary, and said, “Woman, why weepest thou, while thy Lord has risen indeed, and is (alive) so near unto thee? *Let His enemies weep to-day!*” ‘What! How say you—*close that door*. You tall soldier approach: *Was it not you that pierced His side?*’ ‘Yes, it was I; and this relation is all true. I pray that I may never witness such a scene again. Oh! alas, it is all true! He must have been the Son of God!’ The Pharisees lost their case on *the day of appeal*; they gave the soldiers money to say that His disciples had stolen the body while they slept. *If they were asleep, how did they know in what manner He had left the grave?* They, however, suffered themselves to be suborned, and for money lied; and, to this hour, the kingdom of Satan hangs upon that lie.” Such was the preaching of Christmas Evans.

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