

ART. V. — RELIGION AND THE BATTLEFIELD.

“From Aldershot to Pretoria”: Rev. W. E. Sellera. B.T.S.

THOSE who were present at the Thanksgiving Service at St. Paul's Cathedral on Monday, October 29, for our citizen soldiers on their return, will agree that of all the great scenes of religious worship which have taken place in that cathedral, either in the old building or in the vast structure of Wren, not one could have surpassed it in genuineness, sincerity, and impressiveness. It was little more than nine months—283 days—since the young men of the City, “who willingly offered themselves,” had knelt here with grave and serious faces to ask the blessing of God on their arms. In that short time they had travelled 15,000 miles, and been face to face with death in nineteen engagements. Worse than bullet and shell, they had been everywhere surrounded by the pestilence that walketh in darkness, and the destruction that wasteth at noonday: enteric and dysentery, Nature's scourges for foul water and putrid dust, were their deadliest enemy in South Africa. Of the 1,760, sixty alone had fallen. They were men of peace and commerce, not trained to war, leaving prosperous situations, comfortable homes, and beloved relations, at the call of Queen and country. They had no personal animosity against their opponents, absolutely no desire for conquest and aggrandizement. Simply their country wanted them, and they gave themselves, and went. And here they were again, protected by the good hand of God, leaving fewer away on the veldt under the African stars than might have been feared, themselves rich in unstinted praise and stores of experience. As they strode into the cathedral, and knew that in that shadowy mass of fellow-worshippers were their nearest and dearest who had sent them off nine long months ago with so much anxiety and self-sacrifice, and who had now come to join them in thanking God for all His mercies; as they heard the choir sing, “*O Lord God, Thou strength of my health, Thou hast covered my head in the day of battle,*” few could have been unmoved. Throughout the whole mass of worshippers, soldiers and friends, and congregation, there was a deep unshakable sense of the presence and protection of the Almighty Power in whom we live and move and have our being. And I think many an honest heart, under rough and weather-worn exterior, felt as his lesson from the war that duty was better than self-pleasing, and the service of God a nobler end than the indifferent life.

We cannot greatly blame London for once more losing its decorum in a tumult of rejoicing. London is a good-natured

monster, of inconceivable vastness, and when it frisks and gambols its movements must necessarily be uncouth, uncomfortable; but they are not ill-meant. The authorities had miscalculated, and lost control: that was all. Those foreign critics who see in the acclamations of October 29th a wild exhibition of the lust of war have mistaken us ludicrously altogether. The tumult had nothing to do with that. It was nothing whatever but a spontaneous and unanimous sense of strong sympathy for the 1,700 young men who had of their own accord gone out to face deadly peril, had been successful, and had returned with the record of good work done. It is an entire mistake to suppose that Londoners or Englishmen had any hostility against the Boers as such, or any desire whatever for their territory. The Boers would be almost mortified if they could know how little we were thinking about them that day. The war was forced upon us, and the territory is rather an unavoidable burden than a cause for gloating. What Londoners felt was this: here were men who were bone of their bone, and flesh of their flesh, coming from the same homes and occupations as themselves, who had offered themselves in the hour of their country's need, who had done their task well and even nobly, and who deserved all the simple honours that they could pay them. The spectators had not gone themselves, and these men had. The spectators had suffered nothing, but these men had been daily in danger of death. It was a personal feeling, not a political. The wonderful accuracy of the modern press had enabled every Londoner to follow the adventures and experiences of the citizen soldiers from day to day, and to realize the extraordinary difference of their circumstances. And it was genuine, honest, hearty admiration for difficult labours well accomplished, and high character splendidly sustained, that was the secret of the delight of the millions who crowded together. Roughs there were, but they need no reckoning. Young women have never any right to be in a crowd. The men had probably not done more than many another gallant regiment; but they were citizens, not professional soldiers, and they were London's own.

The two Jubilees and the events of the present war have produced and revealed a sense of unity in London which hardly existed before. London felt on October 29th almost like the parents waiting so patiently inside the Cathedral. Many a pathetic scene went on that afternoon in the shadows of the aisles. "Jack!" cried a father, under cover of the organ strains as they were passing out. "Father!" "Ruth, there's Jack!" "I can't get at you, father!" But the others handed him over their heads, and father and son were embraced once

more. Then came the mother's turn, and she was in tears for joy. "There's a son to be proud of!" said the father. "When shall we see you, Jack?" "I won't be long: I'll come as soon as ever I can get away. I'll eat next to nothing; and you'll get me my favourite dish?" Thus were the sacred home-ties once more knit together. The little meal at home was sacramental, and better than banquets, however kindly meant. That was the thought of 1,700 homes, and in that thought London shared.

We do not forget the sixty young faces who joined with the rest in the farewell services of nine months ago whom God has taken. Some we knew must die, and these were the ones who cheerfully and bravely yielded up their boyish lives. They went out to battle, and have not returned. They closed their eyes, perhaps without pain, perhaps without consciousness, on all earthly joys and sorrows, away on the plains and hills of South Africa, mute witnesses to the terrible costliness of war. We do not weep for them. There is a time for all to die, and whether it be sooner or later makes little difference to them. We mourn for the desolate homes, most of all at the present time, when other homes are gay with laughter and song; for them we do not weep. They died in duty, among kindly comrades, cherished by tender affection and prayers, however distant; and their names will be held in lasting love and honour. We may say of them, in Thomas Campbell's version of the beautiful lines of the Greek poet:

But youth's fair form, though fallen, is ever fair,
And beauteous in death the boy appears,
The hero boy that dies in blooming years:
In man's regret he lives, and women's tears,
More sacred than in life, and lovelier far
For having perished in the front of war.

The chances of campaigning are equal to all alike. With her customary considerateness the Queen delayed the publication of her own bereavement till the rejoicings of the citizens were complete. Then, in addition to her kindly message of sympathetic congratulation, she added: "I, alas, myself have to grieve for the loss of a dear and most gallant grandson, who, like so many of your companions, has served and died for his Queen and country." There is something very pathetic in the family loss coming at the very end of the campaign to her who has shown throughout so royal an example of spirit, courage, and sympathy. The dead Prince's mother has endeared herself to all classes by her indefatigable exertions for the poor; and the son had devoted himself systematically and conscientiously to the profession of a soldier. Three expeditions in India, the *Ashanti Expedition*,

Lord Kitchener's Soudan Campaign, and, lastly, a place on Lord Roberts' Staff in South Africa, witness to his diligence and determination. On his way out, in the absence of a chaplain, he conducted service one Sunday on board ship for the troops. Quiet and unobtrusive, with frank and unassuming manner, keen in sport and earnest in service, he was a great favourite with all who knew him, and warmly esteemed both as a man and as a soldier. His character was shown in his request before he went out, that if anything happened to him, he should be buried where he fell, among the men beside whom he had fought. The genuine grief of his family for so kindly, promising, and worthy a member of it will be shared by all who have a heart to feel for the strange vicissitudes of human life, more striking, though not more real, in the neighbourhood of a throne.

Our readers may like to know something of the religious influences that have been at work during the campaign, preparing those who must die for their departure. The nature of the soldier is for the most part a favourable one, to begin with. He is brave, says an officer who has been with him in South Africa, enduring, disciplined, cheerful under misfortune, temperate in success; modest withal, and prone to forget, with surprising quickness, deeds which live for ever in the minds of his compatriots at home. He takes danger and death with cheerful philosophy, and jokes and grumbles as usual even in the most critical moments. But this does not mean that there may not be a deep, simple feeling within, which expresses itself more distinctly in some. In Lord Methuen's column, for instance, after the early battles, every chaplain, reader, agent, and serious-minded soldiers themselves were vigorously at work. The impression had been deep. The war had only just begun, and they knew that there were other terrible fights in store. To the sight of the dead and dying they had not yet got accustomed. The stern reality of battle was upon them, and, as a chaplain wrote, "There are no scoffers left in Lord Methuen's camp." One sergeant who had hardened his heart for three years against a friend's influence, whispered one of those terrible nights to that same comrade that he had done that day what he had not done for thirteen years: he had offered up a prayer, and it had been answered. He had those last few hours seen all his life—seen it as, he fancied, God sees it—and he had vowed, if He would forgive him, to change his ways.

Here is another picture: A gunner is in a battle on January 22. He prayed earnestly all through it. Then he writes: "I sit and muse over the chatter of my children many a time, and almost reach out for them, as though they

were here. They are near to my heart, and in the precious keeping of my Saviour." Not much absence of mind in that man: the vision of the little children rising amidst all the rush and roar of the enemy's shells.

At the meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, a letter was read by the Moderator from twenty-five non-commissioned officers of four regiments in the Highland Brigade, expressing their appreciation of the untiring energy and praiseworthy zeal of their chaplain, not only in camp, but also on the field. "He is invariably among the first to succour our wounded; and many a Scottish mother's heart will be gladdened by the knowledge that her lad's last moments were brightened by his kind administrations. At Magersfontein, Paardeberg, and other engagements, he was always to be found in the firing-line, with a cheerful word or kindly nod of encouragement."

Writing of Magersfontein, that same chaplain says: "Out of evil came good. The depth of latent religious feeling that was evoked in officers and men was a revelation to me; and were it not that confessions, and acknowledgments, and vows were too sacred for repetition, I could tell a tale that would gladden your hearts. Not that I put too much stress on what's said or done at such an impressionable, solemnizing time; but after proof of sincerity has not been wanting . . ." Many hours passed after that slaughter ere the wounded could be relieved. Water-bottles were soon exhausted. One soldier still had a few drops. He saw two lads lying side by side in the agonies of death, and went to the first and offered him the water. The dying man was parched with thirst, and looked at the water with a sad longing, and then feebly shook his head. "Nay," he said, "give it to the other lad. I have the water of life." And he turned round to die.

Burying the hundreds of dead after the fight, the chaplain found many things that cheered him: three boys fallen side by side, who had been struggling for a foremost place, each with the little book of "Prayers for Soldiers" in their pockets, each copy well marked; whole groups with Gospels, Prayer-Books, and "Friendly Words for Soldiers"; here a well-known champion of Christ, who had given himself to Him on the Modder River, now dead, with a look of utter peace upon his face. Such experiences were many.

Here is a letter from a private soldier: "Thank God for the many souls who have found Jesus out here. We feel a mighty power within, and we know it is in answer to the prayers of loved ones in the dear old land. A wall of prayer surrounds us, and we are safe."

Some may have heard every year, on St. David's Eve in

St. Paul's Cathedral, the wonderful melodies of the Welsh hymns. Here is an experience of the Chaplain of the South Wales Borderers. The men had asked for an evening service as well as the morning. "Kneeling on the veldt, man after man broke down. Many openly confessed their sin, others rejoiced. Even then they were not satisfied: a prayer-meeting was asked for, and all stayed. It was truly a grand prayer-meeting. Prayers and hymns followed fast, and many at the close, as they pressed forward to shake hands with me and thank me for coming, said it was one of the happiest Sundays of their life. . . . That night I got permission to have hymns sung on the lines, and you should have heard the Welsh hymns as they rose and fell on the night air. Men crowded from all parts. Officers and men jostled in the crowding ring, while the sweet melodies and harmonies thrilled every soul. It was a happy ending to a happy day. The Colonel has asked me to arrange for this hymn-singing every Sunday night, for he says it is very beautiful, and not only is it highly appreciated by the men, but it has a beneficial influence on them."

Once more. General Lyttelton's Brigade is being marched out from its camping-ground for a desperate task. Before it starts it is formed up in close column, not for inspection, but for prayer. Nothing like it has happened in the history of the war. The Bishop of Natal is with them, and suggests that the best preparation for battle is prayer. With prayer rising for them and following them they march to the storm of war and certain death for many.

On the awful height of Spion Kop one man spent his last moments in writing a letter to his chum, who had changed his heart but the day before. "Dear brother in Christ Jesus," he wrote, "I owe my very soul to you. If it had not been for you, I should not have been ready to die now. It seems hard only to give the last few hours of my life to His service, but I must say good-bye. The angels are calling me home. I can see them and the glorious city. Good-bye, and may God bless you!"

Lastly, listen to one of the chaplains at Ladysmith. He is referring to the epithet applied to the soldier by a popular poet. "It is a fine title itself," he says, "though it referred to him in the wrong way. He was not absent-minded, for he had a warm corner in his heart for those at home. The way he was absent-minded was that he forgot himself. I knew one man who had two or three letters from home, which he carried in his pocket, and although he longed to read them again, he dared not do so, because, he said, he should break down if he did. The boys never forgot their homes. There

was one dead soldier, a poor lad of the Irish Fusiliers, who was shot through the body, and afterwards, in searching his body, they found a letter ready, written and addressed to his mother. He hadn't a chance of posting it. He was certainly not forgetful. When they pulled his letter from his pocket it was impossible to post it, as it was covered with his blood. I readdressed it, and sent it off to the dead soldier's mother."

Another story shows the forgetfulness of the soldier for himself. That happened in the relieving column. An officer was badly wounded. It was dusk, and our troops had to retire down the kopje under cover, though next day they took it. When they retired that night, the wounded officer could not be moved, and so four men refused to leave him. They remained with him all night, without food or water, in order to protect him from the bullets which were flying about—one lying at his head, one at his feet, and another on each side. Those were men who were absent-minded for themselves!

So they passed through the long agony of the war. So they tasted the sharpness of death. Such conduct is Christian virtue, and even if the faith of some of them was small and ignorant, their faith was proved by their works. As a corollary to all this, very earnestly I would call the attention of everybody to the urgent entreaties both of Lord Wolseley and Lord Roberts against treating. "I am very proud," says Lord Roberts, "that I am able to record, with the most absolute truth, that the conduct of this army from first to last has been exemplary. There has been no necessity for appeals or orders to the men to behave properly. I have trusted implicitly to their own soldierly feeling and good sense, and I have not trusted in vain. They bore themselves like heroes on the battlefield, and like gentlemen on all other occasions. . . . I know how keen my fellow-subjects will be to show their appreciation of the upright and honourable bearing as well as the gallantry of our sailors and soldiers, and I would entreat them, in return for all that these grand men have done for them, to abstain from any action that would bring the smallest discredit upon those who have so worthily upheld the credit of their country."

I have lingered too long on the subject of our soldiers, dying and dead. It is of those sixty of the City Imperial Volunteers that I am thinking, who were with us nine months ago, and will return no more. What of them? What is now their condition?

We are yearning for their secret.
Though we call,
No answers ever fall
Upon our dullèd ears
To quell our nameless fears.

Yet God is over all, whate'er may be,
 And, trusting so,
 Patience, my heart! a little while, and we
 Shall know!

All we can say is, that we leave them in the hands of God. About the state of the departed the Church is reverently silent. In other words, she knows nothing whatever about it. All is left to pious conjecture. God has not intended that we should know, and that is enough. The opinions of the early Fathers concerning the residence of the soul in its disembodied state between death and resurrection were various and fluctuating. The idea of an under-world, where departed spirits dwell, was familiar to the Hebrew mind as it was to the Greek; and so far as this idea passed over to Christianity it tended to the doctrine of a state intermediate between this earthly life and the everlasting abode of the soul assigned to it at the Day of Judgment. You know the passage from the Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha, which is the First Lesson for All Saints' Day: "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die, and their departure is taken for misery: and their going from us to be utter destruction; but they are in peace. . . . And in the time of their visitation they shall shine, and run to and fro like sparks among the stubble." Present peace and future glory: that is probably all that we can conjecture.

St. Justin Martyr, in the second century, represents the souls of the righteous as taking up a temporary abode in a happy place, and those of the wicked in a wretched; and stigmatizes as heretical the doctrine that souls are immediately received into heaven at death.

Tertullian held that the martyrs went at once to the abode of the blessed, but that this was a privilege peculiar to them, and not granted to other Christians.

St. Cyprian, on the other hand, says nothing of an intermediate state, and expresses the confident belief that those who die in the Lord will be at once taken to Him.

In the learned School of Alexandria, under the teaching of *St. Clement* and *Origen*, the idea of an intermediate state passed into that of a gradual purification of the soul, paving the way for the later medieval doctrine of Purgatory.

St. Ambrose taught that the soul is separated from the body at death, and after the cessation of the earthly life is suspended in an ambiguous position, awaiting the final judgment.

St. Augustine maintained that the period which intervenes between the death and the final resurrection of man keeps

the souls in quiet refuges, and they are treated according to their character and conduct in the flesh.

The majority of ecclesiastical writers of the time of the Fathers, says the historian of doctrine, Hagenbach, believed that men do not receive their full reward till after the resurrection of the body.

If we look at the New Testament, we find our Lord speaking of a blessed region of happiness for the departed, which in one place he calls "Abraham's bosom," in another Paradise. We find St. Paul relying on being at once in the presence of Christ: "*willing rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord,*" "*I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, to be with Christ, which is far better.*" We find that St. Stephen saw Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and prayed "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*" We find it said of Christ's glorified body, the prototype of ours, "*Whom the heavens must receive until the time of the restitution of all things.*" We find Christ Himself praying in exact accordance with what He said to the dying thief: "*Father, I will that they also whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am.*" We find in the text the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, in speaking of the great cloud of witnesses by whom we are surrounded, saying that we have already come to *the general assembly and church of the first-born, and to the spirits of just men made perfect*, who could not be in any sense witnesses if they were in a condition of sleep. And we find a great number of St. John's glorious visions referring most distinctly to a time before the last great Day of Judgment. We may conclude, therefore, that Paradise, the place of the departed, is one of the earlier of the many mansions that Christ is preparing: that the souls of those who are saved are there received by Christ; and that there they pass the interval between death and the final resurrection in a state of happiness and joy, peace, rest, and instruction, only inferior to the glories and splendours of heaven itself. And so our great Bishop-poet, Dr. Mant, wrote:

Hail, heavenly voice, once heard in Patmos: "Write,
Henceforth the dead who die in Christ are blest;
Yea, saith the Spirit, for they now shall rest
From all their labours!" But no dull, dark night
That rest o'ershadows: 'tis the dayspring bright
Of bliss; the foretaste of a richer feast;
A sleep, if sleep it be, of lively zest,
Peopled with visions of intense delight.
And though the secrets of that resting-place
The soul *embodied* knows not, yet she knows
No sin is there God's likeness to deface,
To stint His love no purgatorial woes;
Her dross is left behind, nor mixture base
Mars the pure stream of her serene repose.

To ourselves the lesson of these thoughts from the experiences of these last twelve months is very vivid and very solemn. Seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us. The lesson is, that we should daily realize the exceeding nearness between life and death, and be ready for either. And if we are to be ready for either, then we must believe with all our hearts in the realities of the future life. The soldier in the campaign can never forget death. Till the last battle is fought, it faces him daily. Not even the most careless can ignore its presence. As war does so much to ennoble character, to banish shame, and to make realities pressing, so this effect of it is most reasonable and true. It shows the true scale of earthly life in human existence. Let our prayer this day be the prayer of the psalm of Moses :

So teach us to number our days
That we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

And as to those who die young, if we are men of faith, there is excellent wisdom in the cheerful lines of Geoffrey Chaucer :

And could we choose the time, and choose aright,
'Tis best to die, our honour at the height.
When we have done our ancestors no shame,
But served our friends, and well secured our fame,
Then should we wish our happy life to close,
And leave no time for fortune to dispose ;
So should we make our death a glad relief
From future shame, from sickness and from grief :
Enjoying while we live the present hour,
And dying in our excellence and flower—
Then round our deathbed every friend should run,
All joyous of our conquest early won :
While the malicious world with envious tears
Should grudge our happy end, and wish it theirs !

WILLIAM SINCLAIR.

