

## Malachi.

*(The last of a series of three addresses given in Westminster Abbey by the Rt. Rev. H. E. RYLE, D.D., C.V.O., Dean of Westminster.)*

THE last section of the Book of the Prophet Malachi is that which we discuss this afternoon, Mal. iii. 13–iv. 6. It deals with three recognizable topics. (1) iii. 13–15, the doubts and murmurings excited among the Jews by the prosperity of the wicked and the misfortunes of the faithful : (2) iii. 16–iv. 3, those who fear and love God are reassured that they are His “peculiar treasure,” and that the Day of the Lord will dissipate all fear of injustice, with its dawn of healing and happiness to His servants and of final discomfiture to His foes : (3) iv. 4–6, the book closes with a passage which brings into striking combination the two great names of Israel’s earlier religious life. Let the law of Moses be diligently observed ; let the coming of the prophet Elijah be eagerly expected. The Lord God, whose love the Jews could not realize, had ordained them the moral law of Moses which they failed to keep, and He would send to them the Forerunner of the Messiah, the Elijah, who, like his great predecessor, would bring new life to a hesitating and faithless people.

1. Our first lesson from this section seems to be this: that *selfish impatience is often a source of religious doubt.*

When the Jews to whom the prophet speaks saw some of their countrymen, in spite of their purity and integrity of life, down-trodden, distressed, and miserable, and others, who threw religion to the winds and flaunted their looseness of morals and their neglect of the sacred law, flourishing with prosperity and success, they were tempted to exclaim, “There is no God at all,” “God is unjust,” “It is vain to serve God : What profit is there that we have kept His charge?” (ver. 14). It is the same cause of doubt and perplexity which we find in the writings of Job and in some of the Psalms. It is not uncommon in our own time. Men take short views. They are impatient for immediate results. If a man is a good man, and there is a God of the Universe, why should he suffer misfortune, while a bad unscrupulous man is prosperous and happy? It required strong faith on the part of the Jewish prophet to trust God in the dark days as well as in the bright. But that is what he en-

courages his countrymen to do. He cannot explain all the puzzles of life. But he is confident that God is a God of love. Like the great writer of the 53rd Chapter of Isaiah, he could see that suffering and sacrifice on the part of the servant of God may be the appointed path of highest duty and may have a power of redeeming efficacy.

That which was utterly dark and bewildering to the devout Jewish prophet, has received light and meaning from the good news of the Cross of Christ and of His Resurrection. The Cross of Jesus Christ has shown that even in suffering there is a divine purpose, and that God's love has not been withdrawn, because fortune has vanished, or joy is swallowed up in pain, or bereavement has cut down the brightest flowers of earthly hope and promise. God's full purpose needs eternity for fulfilment. Earth is only a fragment. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ has shown that the inequalities, the distresses, the seeming injustices of earthly experience are not the final expression of God's Will. The tyrant, the perjured oppressor, the destroyer of faith and home, the corrupter of virtue, may seemingly pay no penalty on earth; but such immunity is no proof of God's favour.

People ask impatiently "What shall we get? Will virtue pay?" They think only of a temporal recompense. They have not learned to lift their eyes above the low level of earth's comforts and pleasures. When our Lord speaks of reward, it is of "reward in heaven."

Much religious doubt has its rise in the "topsy-turviness" of human affairs. The sin which results from man's grasping at selfish aims produces confusion and misery. We must resist the impulse to selfish impatience. The earth is a very little place, and life here a tiny prelude, in the whole Universe of the Divine Purpose of Perfect Love and Justice.

2. The Second Lesson is that "*the Communion of Saints is secure in God's Fatherly Protection.*" Very strikingly beautiful are the words of verses 16 and 17, "Then they that feared the Lord spake one with another; and the Lord hearkened and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord and that thought upon His name. And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in the day that I do make, even a peculiar treasure; and I will spare them as a man spareth his own son that serveth him."

In spite of the inequalities and troubles which shake the faith of many, there are even in these very things materials for the spiritual sympathy and communion of God's servants. We know well that Christians "in dark days" can draw very close together. Unity of faith is a very real bond between those who are thrown together in common losses and common griefs. There is no promise to those who shut themselves up in the solitude of selfish introspection. It seems to be God's law; to which the prophet points, that spiritual life can grow and bring forth much fruit in the soil deepened and enriched by fellowship of sorrow. Encouragement comes from the sense of sharing the same hope and from obedience to the same duty of patient endurance. "They that fear the Lord, they that think upon His name," receive a wonderful promise. God is their father: He may chasten, but His love never fails. They are "His peculiar treasure." They are safe in His keeping. What concerns them, is not forgotten nor ignored by Him. Their troubles, their weakness, their depression, are His care. Their names are written in God's book of loving remembrance.

Here is a wonderful source of hope. Do we make enough of this treasure of brotherly intercourse and union? God blesses friendship and sympathy to be the means of consolation and help in a degree, which those cannot realize whose only hope is in this life, and whose only pleasures begin and end in bodily health and prosperity. We may not be able to explain the problems of our trials. But we may be sure of finding something fresh of God's love revealed to us in the words and lives of those who are dear to us in the faith, and who partially at least interpret to us the fullness of His goodness and compassion. Let us not take these privileges as if they were a matter of course. They are among God's precious gifts on earth to His saints. They grow larger by use and by thankful acknowledgment. They are signs of God's Fatherly Protection. They help us to bear sorrows more bravely. They teach us the Christian duty of cultivating acts and habits of sympathy. They encourage us to see in earthly friendships the symbol of the eternal and the heavenly. God comforts the stricken hearts of those who try to comfort others. There is no blessing on the selfishness of sorrow any more than on the selfishness of joy.

3. The last lesson which I have time to draw from our book is contained in the prophet's closing appeal to "the law and the pro-

phets." The work of the lawgiver and the inspiration of the Prophet can neither of them be neglected by the servants of the Lord. What is the lesson we learn from this exhortation to remember the law of Moses and to look for the coming of Elijah? Surely, it is this: *The discipline of the Moral Law must be combined with the freedom of the quickening Spirit.* The law is the bulwark of social order; and the temper of obedience will ever resist the irregularities which spring from a shallow love of change, or from the volcanic destructiveness of revolution. But the life of true religion wants something more than the observance of rule and law, something more than the preservation of truth and doctrine.

The work of Elijah is wanted as well as that of Moses. Religion is not merely an appeal to the force of sacred enactments or to the glory of traditional worship. The Church is a living society, not a museum of ecclesiastical antiquarianism. It needs to be fed by the Spirit, taught by the Spirit, inspired by the Spirit. "Quench not the Spirit," says St. Paul, "despise not prophesyings."

And so, before each coming of the Lord, the Prophet, the Forerunner, the Elijah, heralds the judgment of the Church or of the nations.

His greatest work is not that of menace and destruction, but of reconciliation and readjustment. Any little mind can undertake the task of fault-finding and denunciation. But the task of bringing together alienated and offended hearts is one that taxes the magnanimity of a true Prophet. "He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (iv.6). The older generation rarely understands the younger; the younger rarely understands the older. The older hopes to train the younger after its own pattern; the younger is quite sure that the old ways are obsolete, and is impatient with any expression of doubt or dislike in reference to newer thought or policy.

In an age of transition the consequences are often disastrous. It is the work of a master mind to reconcile the jarring forces of experience and enthusiasm, and to blend their veneration for the past with their passion for the future. The Elijah-spirit makes ready for the coming of the Lord in the great epochs of the world's history and the Church's life. The rough steep ridges shall be levelled, the winding narrow turns shall be straightened. There shall be a highway for the Lord. And this vision of the ideal fills with hope

the mind of the true prophet who seeks to interpret the love of God to his countrymen. His prayer will ever be that in the new era there may be no obstruction or needless delay, no recklessness of innovating haste, no rejection of reform, and no overthrow of hallowed landmarks.

This, I believe, is the hope that burns brightly in the closing words of the "book Malachi." And we feel the appropriateness of its message to our own day.

In spite of coldness of faith and lack of spiritual zeal, the Messenger of the Lord proclaims in the new age of change, as in that of the Jews in the Persian Period, the assurance of "God's love in dark days."

It is a continual source of consolation to the Christian believer to find that the trials and troubles of modern experience were long ago cheerfully met and bravely resisted by the inspired prophets of the Old Testament. Their writings are an unflinching encouragement in times of depression. We never search them in vain to find the Word of God speaking to our hearts.

