

## The Devotional Reading of Holy Scripture.

AD CLERUM.

**I**N venturing to address this article to the Clergy may I say at the outset that *mutatis mutandis* the subject of the Devotional Reading of Holy Scripture is generally applicable to all Christians, and specially to Diocesan and Parochial Readers, Bible Class and Sunday School Teachers—to all in fact who are called upon to teach. It closely touches the spiritual life not only of the Clergy, but also of all who are called “unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. iv. 12, R.V.). But while such may find the subject not inappropriate I propose to address myself specially to the Clergy.

At the most solemn moment in their lives those about to be ordained are asked “Will you be diligent in reading the Holy Scriptures, and such studies as help to the knowledge of the same, laying aside the study of the world and the flesh?” to which the answer was given, “I will endeavour myself so to do, the Lord being my helper.” The Cleric is therefore pledged to be a student of God’s Word.

If we may enlarge St. Paul’s charge to Timothy, “Give heed to reading” (1 Tim. iv. 13), applying it to reading and study in general, it goes without saying that the Clergy must be readers and students of current literature. We ought to know what our people are reading and thinking about, if we are to be any help to them amid the perplexities of modern thought. It would, of course, be a mistake to be always obtruding our knowledge of these things upon our people; but I venture to think that we do need the knowledge for ourselves, that we may be able when occasion seems to call for it to bring forth out of our treasures things “new” as well as “old.” It would also, I conceive, be a mistake to be always preaching (as some appear to do) on literary, scientific or social topics, for the special business of the Clergy is to “preach the Gospel”; but on the other hand I think we lose much by ignoring what is occupying men’s minds or what is occurring in the daily life of the nation or parish. For example, I heard of a preacher who, delivering more than one sermon each week, in the first two or more years of the present war,

only made one or two passing illusions to it, leaving the impression on some of his hearers that the sermons were prepared long before the war! If we act in this way we incur the charge of "other worldliness" so often brought against the preachers of the Gospel. Our Lord surely set us an example here, as when he referred to the accident at Siloam and Pilate's massacre of the Galileans, and to local incidents which appear to underlie some at least of His parables. We cannot go far wrong if we follow His guidance in this as in other respects.

Nor can we neglect the special study of the Bible and of books which throw light upon it, in connexion with the particular passage on which we propose to preach, while we do well to avoid what has been called "Text Theology"—that is, practically taking a text as a "motto," without any or little regard to its context and imparting to it some imaginary interpretation of our own. This surely would be a violation of the canon, "No prophecy of scripture is of private interpretation" (2 Peter i. 20). We are called upon to teach as well as to exhort—to build up our people "in their most holy faith" and in the life of godliness. We are entrusted with a Divine message, as God's Ambassadors, and we must study the records which God has given us. One of the charges brought against the preaching of the present day is that it is not expository. To avoid this charge, we must "search the Scriptures." While it is true that a critical study of the Bible is needful in these days, it is well for us to avoid approaching the Holy Scriptures in such a manner as to forget that in them "men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter i. 21). We must strive to live up to the high standard set forth by Shakespeare, when he puts into the mouth of Prince John the words:—<sup>1</sup>

"Who hath not heard it spoken,  
How deep you were within the books of God?  
To us, the speaker in his parliament;  
To us, the imagin'd voice of Heaven itself;  
The very opener and intelligencer,  
Between the grace, the sanctities of heaven,  
And our dull workings."

But apart altogether from the study of the Bible for sermons, it is essential that we should cultivate the habit of daily reading the Scriptures devotionally for our own soul's growth. It is so easy—

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry IVth*, Part II, Scene II.

who has not realized it?—to allow the desire of helping others to interfere with our own spiritual needs. If the purpose of Holy Scripture be “That the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work,” then—if we are in a special sense “men of God”—a daily partaking of the heavenly food of the Scriptures is absolutely necessary; our own minds must be thoroughly steeped in God’s Word, and we must know its precious truths first as God’s message to ourselves—for the sustentation of our own spiritual lives—before we can hope effectually to dispense them to others. We must receive the Bread of Life ourselves before we can distribute it to others.

It is, of course, very easy to say this but in the face of all the difficulties of our positions to-day, it is not so easy to carry out.

Shall we recall some of the OBSTACLES in the way of our devotional study of the Holy Scriptures—which, after all, are reasons why we should definitely set apart some time each day for this purpose?

Apart altogether from the war and its constant and almost overwhelming calls upon the Clergy, there are the endless claims upon our time—the multiplied services, the letters to reply to, the committees to attend, the accounts to keep (where Laymen cannot be secured to undertake them), the preparation of the Parish Magazine (which occupies so many hours each month)—many of which our forefathers were free from. These have to be heeded, and they break into the daily routine, and in some cases at least tend to put personal prayer and the devotional study of the Bible in a secondary place. Much of our time is taken up with what one has called “hurdle making,” which often prevents our feeding our own souls as we should.

The late Canon Wynne writes:—

“Besides our general study of Scripture as students, with the help of commentaries and critical apparatus; besides our study as Teachers, preparing for our expositions, and storing our minds with the treasures we are to impart to others, we should have our little sacred seasons when, as weak and ignorant children, we come ourselves to the Father of Lights to hear what He has to say to our souls.”<sup>1</sup>

The danger of over-familiarity with the Bible has to be guarded against, as the late Dean Vaughan pointed out, in words which the Clergy may apply with special force to themselves:—

“The evil of over-acquaintance must be grappled with. . . . We must seize the fugitive word as it escapes from us; we must grasp it, we must hold,

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<sup>1</sup>Wynne, *Joy of the Ministry*, p. 71.

we must question it and not let it go except it answer us. We must say, What art thou to me? Speak not to the world, but speak to me. What dost thou say to me from my Maker? and what must I do in consequence of thee? Tell me anything—ever so little, ever so obvious—only tell it to me by myself, none else hearing, none else observing.”<sup>1</sup>

Then is there another danger arising from being so immersed in the mere critical study of the Bible almost to the point of forgetting that it is the inspired Word of God. Whatever our views on inspiration may be, at least they place the Bible in a supreme position. The devotional reading of Holy Scripture cannot but be a corrective, and will help to check this danger. We must feel its living power as it speaks to our own souls; and this it does most effectively when we read it in the secrecy of our own chamber or on our knees.

But it may be asked, how is this devotional reading of the Bible to be accomplished? How are we to find time for it, and what method should we employ?

The late Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, in addressing his Ordination candidates on the “Vow of Diligence in the study of Holy Scripture,” said:—

“To a life of prayer must be added a deep, constant study of God’s Word for our own spiritual growth. It is not a superficial reading of it for the sake of others which will do. If we limit ourselves to this, we shall but defeat our own purpose; we shall grow shallow, self-repeating and unreal. Our own souls must be continually bathed in those living streams if we would keep them apt and ready for heavenly visitations. Thus only will our ministry have that breadth and compass, and our doctrine (the) just harmony of several truths in their due proportions and relations. . . . No substitute will do here. The very best books are separated by an impassable gulf from the book of God. It is only by daily ‘reading and weighing of the Scriptures’ under the ‘heavenly assistance of the Holy Ghost that we can wax riper and stronger in our ministry’; it is only by studying God’s Word for ourselves, and not merely to teach out of it, that our faculties for teaching can be in any measure perfected. On the great deep of Holy Scripture we float away from our prejudices and preconceptions and, afar from the creeping mists and rocky barriers of the narrowing coast, and alone with God, can see in open vision the vastness of all His loving purposes. They who haunt these mighty tides see the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep.”<sup>2</sup>

In these striking words the Bishop sets forth the need for and the blessedness of the devotional reading of God’s Word: they appeal to us with all the authority and power of one who was a “Master in Israel.”

<sup>1</sup> Vaughan, *The Book and the Life*.

<sup>2</sup> Wilberforce, *Ordination Addresses*.

But how are we to carry out these recommendations? I suggest a few ways, mostly gathered from those who are qualified to advise on this subject.

Dr. Girdlestone writes, "Our first duty is to meditate," and "meditation is a matter of habit"<sup>1</sup>—it needs to be cultivated. For this we must find time. The rush and stress of clerical life—already referred to—demand that we should have opportunities for quiet thought. Can we not find this necessary time by rising a little earlier than we have been accustomed to? This is what some of the greatest saints have done; at all events, if we would walk in their footsteps we ought to set apart some time each day for this purpose, apart altogether from that devoted to sermon preparation or critical study.

Another suggestion of Dr. Girdlestone is that we should turn Scripture into Prayer and Praise; not only the definite Prayers and Praises—of which there are so many in the Bible—but every Promise and Precept. "Every Precept," he says, "may be turned into prayer and every Promise into praise." We may find something in almost "every passage which comes before us both to pray over and to thank God over."<sup>2</sup> I may instance Bishop Andrewes' "Devotions"—in which nearly all the prayers are in the language of Scripture—as a striking example of how to do this.

Then, if the Scripture is to be to us "a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path," we must apply its statements to our own daily lives, as well as to the lives of our people. In the charge at the Ordination of priests the candidates are bidden to "consider how studious ye ought to be in reading and learning the Scriptures and in framing the manners both of yourselves and of them that specially pertain unto you, according to the rule of the same Scriptures: and for this self-same cause, how ye ought to forsake and set aside (as much as you may) all worldly cares and studies." There is nothing so helpful to the cultivation of this unworldly life as the habitual devotional reading of Holy Scripture.

Bishop Samuel Wilberforce remarks, in his addresses to his Ordination candidates, in the chapter on "Being Ensamples to the Flock," that "The secret influences of a holy life steal upon them as the early dews of morning or the fragrance of incense coming they

<sup>1</sup> Girdlestone, *How to read the English Bible*, ch. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

know not whence, and seizing upon the open sense before it has time to close itself against them." He goes on to say that those who would be teachers of others have "no privacy. Their life is ever teaching one way or the other, far more eloquently than their direct words or formal exhortations." He quotes George Herbert's words, that "the virtuous life of a Clergyman is the most powerful eloquence to persuade all that see it to reverence and love, and, at least, to desire to live like him."<sup>1</sup> We can only live this virtuous life as our souls feed at the fountain-head of God's truth, as we read the Holy Scriptures devotionally and apply its principles to our own lives.

The writers of the Bible set us an example of personally heeding the messages they are bidden to communicate to others. Not only do they charge their readers "not to be barren nor unfruitful unto the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter i. 8); not only do they urge them to "long for the spiritual milk which is without guile, that ye may grow thereby unto salvation" (1 Peter ii. 2); not only did they charge the Christian Minister to "Hold fast the faithful word," but they themselves seem to have felt the need of a personal feeding upon that Word. We see this especially in the Psalms. I cull the following from Psalm cxix. as illustrations of this.

"Thy word have I laid up in my heart that I might not sin against Thee" (ver. 11).

"I will delight myself in Thy statutes" (ver. 16).

"O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day" (ver. 97).

"How sweet are Thy words unto my taste. Yea, sweeter than honey unto my mouth" (ver. 103).

The whole psalm is indeed an illustration of the truth that a personal feeding upon the Word of Life is necessary for all who are the leaders of others be they men and women or children. If we need any stimulus to the devotional reading of the Scriptures we surely have it here.

I will only add the suggestion that it would be well if we select for our devotional reading one of the calendar lessons for the day. This will be easier and probably more profitable, than having to select some other passage. Moreover, it may lead to the charge being better observed, that "All Priests and Deacons are to say daily the Morning and Evening Prayer, either privately or openly, not being let by sickness, or some other urgent cause."

<sup>1</sup> Wilberforce, *Ordination Addresses*.

To conclude, let me say that it is only as we know the value of the Holy Scriptures for ourselves that we shall be able to make them appreciated by our people. If we would avoid the charge—

“The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,”

let us see to it that we know from personal experience the blessedness given utterance to by the Psalmist in the Shepherd Psalm (xxiii. 2)—  
 “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures ; He leadeth me beside the still waters.” Thus only can we escape the self-condemnation of the writer of the Song of Solomon—“They made me keeper of the vineyards : but mine own vineyard have I not kept ” (Cant. i. 6).

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