

SERMONS *Maine*

ON

SEVERAL SUBJECTS.

BY THE RIGHT REVEREND

BEILBY PORTEUS, D. D.

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THE sacred hymn, of which the text is a part, is that which the heavenly host were heard to sing at the birth of Christ ; and the meaning of the words is generally allowed to be, That this great event would be productive of peace to all the inhabitants of the earth, and was a most striking proof of God's good-will to mankind.

One cannot help observing with what solemnity our blessed Redeemer was introduced into the world. He had not indeed any of this world's pomp to follow him. The grandeur that attended him was, like his kingdom, of a spiritual nature ; and it was a grandeur which shamed the pride of earthly magnificence. He was welcomed into life by the united congratulations of those celestial spirits, whose abodes he had just quitted, to take upon him the form of a man. It is the only event recorded in history, that was ever dignified with such rejoicings, except that of the creation. When the "corner-stone" of the earth was laid, the sacred writers tell us "that the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy*." This *corner-stone* † of the *new creation* was laid with the same solemnity. It should seem that these were the only two occasions which deserved so glorious a distinction ; and that the redemption of

* Job xxxviii. 6, 7.

† Eph. ii. 20.

mankind appeared to the heavenly host to be a work no less glorious to God, and beneficial to man, than their creation. It is indeed in this light that the Scriptures do all along consider it. They represent it as a *new creation**, as an entrance upon a *new life*†, as the production of a *new man*‡, and frequently speak of it in terms that have a manifest allusion to the first formation of all things. Christ himself is called THE LIGHT of this new world||; and, as the *power and wisdom* of God are “clearly seen in the things that “are made§, in the *natural* world, so in reference to the *spiritual* world, our Lord is in a still more emphatical manner styled THE POWER OF GOD, AND THE WISDOM OF GOD ¶. And indeed, if to form the goodly fabric of this globe out of a confused heap of jarring elements, to raise up man from the dust of the ground, and breathe into him a living soul, were a most lively display of God’s infinite wisdom and power, it was surely no less striking a proof of those divine attributes, to find out a way of reconciling his justice and his mercy, of bringing peace and salvation out of guilt and misery, and “quicken^g us again when dead in “trespasses and sins**.” And as our redemption was no less glorious to God than our creation, so neither was it less beneficial to man. We should have had but little reason to rejoice in our creation, had not God once more “created us to good works††.” Christianity threw open to us another and a better world, “a new heaven and a new earth‡‡;” it restored to us the only things that could make existence worth possessing, the favor of God, the means of happiness, and the hopes of immortality.

It is worthy also of observation, that this mode of celebrating the birth of our Redeemer was most remarkably adapted to the character of the Messiah, and the nature of the commission with which he was charged. The ancient historians frequently affected to usher in the birth of warriors and conquerors with

* 2 Cor. v. 17. Gal. vi. 15. † Rom. vi. 4. ‡ Eph. iv. 24. Col. iii. 10.
 || John viii. 12. § Rom. i. 20. ¶ 1 Cor. i. 24. ** Eph. ii. 1.
 †† Ephes. ii. 10. ‡‡ 2 Pet. iii. 13.

portents and prodigies of a dreadful nature; commendable in this, at least, that their fictions were well-suited to their personages, the enemies and destroyers of mankind. The Friend and Saviour of mankind was introduced into the world with declarations of universal peace and good-will. And in this the angels only speak the constant language of Scripture in describing the Messiah. They speak of him in a manner in which he loves to speak of himself, in which the prophets spoke of him before, and the apostles after him. He is called by Isaiah “THE PRINCE OF PEACE.” “Of the increase of his government and peace there is said to be no end*.” A little after, his reign is described by the most pacific emblems that imagination could furnish, by “the wolf dwelling with the lamb, and the leopard lying down with the kid †.” His work of righteousness is peace ‡, and he makes with mankind the covenant of peace §. He himself tells his disciples, that “in him they were to have peace ||;” and it is the legacy he bequeaths them, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you**.” The sacred writers continue the same language in the New Testament. “The kingdom of God is joy and peace ††.” His Gospel is called “the Gospel of peace ††;” and it is their constant salutation to the persons and churches to which they write. So remarkable a frequency and agreement in the use and application of this word, naturally raise our curiosity to enquire into the meaning of it, and make it worth our while to enquire in what sense or senses Christ may be said *to have brought peace upon earth*: which will lead us to the proof of the latter part of the text, that his birth was a most remarkable instance of *God’s good-will to mankind*.

I. The first and most important sense in which our Lord may be said to have brought us *peace*, was, by taking upon him the sins of the world, and thereby making *our peace with God*, and in consequence of

* Isaiah ix. 6. 7. † Ib. xi. 6. ‡ Ib. xxxii. 17. § Ib. liv. 10. || John xvi. 33. ** John xiv. 27. †† Rom. xiv. 17. †† Ib. x. 15.

this, giving us that *that peace of mind* which the world could not give. “He is our peace,” says the apostle, “that he might reconcile us to God*.” “The chastisement of our peace was upon him†.” “Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ‡.” Expressions of this and the like import are so frequent in Scripture, that it is impossible for the most ingenious criticism to elude their force. They evidently prove, that the PEACE which our Saviour “brought on earth,” was in its primary acceptation of a *spiritual* nature; that when we were at enmity with God, our peace was made with him by the death of his Son; that he gave himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God||; and that this is the chief point of view in which his divine mission is considered in Scripture. And no wonder that it should be so; for it was this of which mankind stood in the greatest need, and which natural religion was least able to afford. Whatever pretensions reason might make to the knowledge of a future state, or a complete rule of moral conduct, yet, to find out what atonement God would be pleased to accept for the sins of the whole world, was a discovery which exceeded the utmost stretch of her abilities. That *some* expiation was necessary, the Heathens plainly saw. They saw, that if there was a God, he must be pleased with virtue, and offended with vice. They perceived, that they were *not* virtuous, and therefore could not be in favor with God. They seem even to have wanted the first and fundamental requisite to tranquillity, an assurance that pardon was on *any* terms to be obtained. Their Jupiter was armed with *thunder and lightning*; he had the ministers of his vengeance always at hand: but they had no emblems by which they were accustomed to express his *mercy*. There was indeed a *possibility*, perhaps a probability, that the Deity *might* pardon their offences; but there was also a possibility that he might *not*; and the very *possibility* of being exposed to the resentment of a Being, without mercy

* Eph. ii. 11, 16 † Isai. liii. 5 ‡ Rom. v. 1. || Heb. ix. 26; x. 12.

and without control, was enough to sink them into despair. But whatever hopes they might have of appeasing the Deity by proper means, they could have but little (as I before observed) of finding out those means. The sacrifice of animals was the atonement on which they principally depended (a plain proof by the way, that the necessity of *some* animal sacrifice was an idea deeply rooted in the hearts of men); but they were not always satisfied even with this. Having perfect confidence in nothing, they tried every thing. They ran from one experiment to another, and, like men ready to perish, caught at every thing that seemed to afford the least shadow of relief. Hence that incredible number of deities, temples, altars, festivals, games, sacrifices, supplications, processions, and, in short, that infinite variety of ceremonies and superstitions, which served plainly to *show* their uneasiness, but not at all to *remove* it.

Here, then, the Gospel gave us PEACE, where nothing human could. From this we know that God is merciful, long-suffering, and of great goodness. We know that he is reconciled to us by the death of his Son; we are acquainted also with the means of preserving that favor which Christ procured for us; and there is no longer added to the misery of guilt, the torment of not knowing how to expiate it. We are assured, “ that
 “ Jesus is the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin
 “ of the world: that he came to seek and to save that
 “ which was lost: and that whosoever believeth in him
 “ shall not perish, but have everlasting life*. In this respect, therefore, that is, in the most important of all human concerns, the meanest man amongst us has more true content, and peace, and satisfaction of mind†, than all the learning and wisdom of all the philosophers upon earth, ancient or modern, could ever bestow. But,

II. It is not only in a spiritual sense that our Redeemer *brought peace upon earth*; it is true of him in

* John i. 29. Matth. xviii. 11. John iii. 15.

† Te duce, si qua manent sceleris vestigai nostri,

Irrita perpetua solvent formidine terras. VIRG. Ecl. iv. 13.

a temporal meaning also. That benevolence of disposition, and gentleness of behavior, which he so constantly and so warmly recommended, both by his doctrine and his example, were entirely calculated to promote the peace and harmony of mankind, and to knit them together in one common bond of love and affection. If ever PEACE was made visible in outward form, it was in the person of our blessed Lord. His whole life and conversation were one uniform representation of it, insomuch that it might, even in this sense, be affirmed of him, that “of his PEACE there was no end*.” It would be no difficult nor unpleasing task to trace the influence of this principle from his earliest to his latest breath; and to draw together a very uncommon and surprizing assemblage of circumstances, all concurring to establish the uniformity of its operation through the whole tenor of his life; but it may suffice for the present to touch upon a few of the most obvious. It has always been remarked, that he came into the world in a time of profound and almost universal peace; and his birth was (as we have seen) first announced, by declarations of peace and good-will, to shepherds, men, generally speaking, of a most quiet and inoffensive disposition and behavior. The years of his childhood were passed in a meek and dutiful subjection to his earthly parents; and after he came into public life, he showed the same peaceable submission to all his other lawful superiors. The persons whom he chose to be the companions and the witnesses of his ministry, were of the lowest station, and the humblest tempers. The first miracle he worked, was with a design to promote good-humor and good-will among men; and all of them tended to improve the peaceful enjoyment of life in some material instance. Yet, benevolent as the design of these and all his other actions was, he endeavored to do them all in such a manner, at such times, and in such places, as to give no offence to any one; to excite no envy, jealousy, or unjust suspicions. He had at the same time to struggle with the prejudices, the mistakes,

* Isaiah ix. 7.

and misconstructions of his friends, and the inveterate rancor of his enemies ; but yet he never suffered either the one or the other to disturb the composure of his mind, or the peaceableness of his deportment. He bore all the unmerited insults and injuries of his adversaries with more patience than his followers could see them, and was almost the only person that was not provoked at the treatment he met with. The same love of peace attended him to the last. The sword that was drawn in his defence he ordered to be sheathed*, and healed the wound it had inflicted†. Although, “ if he had
 “ prayed to his father, he would have sent him twelve
 “ legions of angels‡, yet he suffered himself to be
 “ led like a lamb to the slaughter ; and as a sheep be-
 “ fore her shearers is dumb, so opened he not his
 “ mouth§.

As he lived, so he also taught, for he “ spoke
 “ PEACE to his people**.” The main purport of his discourses was, to banish from the minds of men all those malignant and turbulent passions which fill the world with disorder and misery, and to introduce in their room, every thing that tends to turn away wrath, to soften resentment, and to cherish peace ; a meek and inoffensive deportment, a patient resignation under injuries and affronts, a compassionate tenderness and fellow-feeling for the miseries of others, and a benevolence as extensive as the whole creation of God. If ever he entered into a house, he saluted it with peace††. If the penitent and contrite sinner fell down and begged mercy at his feet, he bid him go in peace and sin no more‡‡. He was continually exhorting his disciples to “ be at peace one with another, to love their very
 “ enemies, to bless those that cursed them, to do good
 “ to those that hated them, and to pray for those that
 “ despitefully used and persecuted them§§.”

From such a doctrine, supported by such an example, one might naturally hope for the most pacific effects. And in fact those effects have followed. For,

* John xviii. 11. † Luke xxii. 51. ‡ Matth. xxvi. 53. § Isai. liii. 7.

** Zech. ix. 10. †† Luke x. 5. ‡‡ Ib. vii. 50 ; viii. 48. John viii. 11.

§§ Mark ix. 50. Matt. iv. 44.

although Christianity has not always been so well understood, or so honestly practised, as it might have been ; although its spirit has been often mistaken, and its precepts misapplied *, yet, under all these disadvantages, it has gradually produced a visible and a blessed change in those points which most materially concern the peace and quiet of the world. Its beneficent spirit has spread itself through all the different relations and modifications of life, and communicated its kindly influence to almost every public and private concern of mankind. It has insensibly worked itself into the inmost frame and constitution of civil states. It has given a tinge to the complexion of their governments, to the temper and administration of their laws. It has restrained the spirit of the prince, and the madness of the people. It has softened the rigor of despotism, and tamed the insolence of conquests. It has, in some degree, taken away the edge of the sword, and thrown even over the horrors of war a veil of mercy. It has descended into families, has diminished the pressure of private tyranny, improved every domestic endearment, given tenderness to the parent, humanity to the master, respect to superiors, to inferiors ease ; and left, in short, the most evident traces of its PEACEFUL GENIUS, in all the various subordinations, dependencies, and connexions of social life. These assertions would very easily admit, and may perhaps hereafter receive a particular proof. But, for the present, I must content myself with observing in general, that mankind are, upon the whole, even in a temporal view, under infinite obligations to the mild and pacific temper of the Gospel ; have reaped from it more substantial worldly benefits than from any other institution upon earth ; and found it, by happy experience, to be a religion entirely worthy the gracious Father of the universe, and the Saviour of mankind. As one proof of this, (among many others) consider only the shocking carnage made in the human species, by the exposure of infants, the gladiatorial shows, and

* See the preceding discourse.

the exceedingly cruel usage of slaves, allowed and practised by the ancient Pagans. These were not the accidental and temporary excesses of a sudden fury, but were *legal*, and *established*, and *constant* methods of murdering and tormenting mankind, encouraged by the wisest legislators, and affording amusement to the tenderest and most compassionate minds*. Had Christianity done nothing more than brought into disuse (as it confessedly has done) the two former of these inhuman customs entirely, and the latter to a very great degree, it had justly merited the title of the BENEVOLENT RELIGION. But this is far from being all. Throughout the more enlightened parts of Christendom, there prevails a gentleness of manners widely different from the ferocity of the most civilized nations of antiquity; and that liberality with which every species of distress is relieved, both by private donations and public benefactions, even in some of the most bigotted countries of Europe, is a virtue as peculiar to the Christian name as it is eminently conducive to social happiness. As for ourselves, in the nature of our civil constitution, in the extent of our freedom, in the security of our persons and properties, in the temper of our laws, in the administration of justice, in domestic

* Besides the many other well-known severities exercised towards the slaves of the ancients, there was a law at Sparta, called the *Cryptia*, which ordered them to be murdered in cold blood, whenever they increased so fast as to give umbrage to the state. *Plutarch, in Lycurg.* The same author (*De Amore Proliis*) speaks of the exposure of infants as a very common practice. *Seneca* does the same. *De Ira*, l. i. c. 15. It still obtains among the savages in America; and it is said, that upwards of 3000 children are annually exposed in the streets of Pekin. *Lipsius* affirms (*Saturn.*, l. i. c. 12.) that the gladiatorial shows sometimes cost Europe twenty or thirty thousand lives in a month; and not only the men, but even the women of all ranks, were passionately fond of these shows. The execrable barbarities here mentioned, continued as they were without intermission through a long course of years, must have destroyed many more lives than all the temporary ravages of religious persecution put together. I cannot conclude this note, without observing how strongly these shocking facts confirm the description given of the ancient heathens by St. Paul, who represents them as *full of murder, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful.* Rom. i. 29, 31. And indeed the whole picture he there draws of Pagan morality and religion will be found, on examination, to be in every the minutest feature of it *exactly and accurately true.* Let the reader peruse that chapter with attention, and let him thank God, from the bottom of his soul, that he is a CHRISTIAN.

peace and comfort, in offices of mutual kindness and charity, we have a visible and undeniable superiority over the ancients. To what then can this happy change in our circumstances be owing? To philosophy (replies the Deist *) to mild and gentle philosophy, to the humane suggestions of reason, and the improvement of the liberal arts. Were then reason, philosophy, and good learning, utterly unknown in Greece and Rome? Were not these the very fountains of every thing that was sublime and excellent in human wisdom and polite literature, from whence they were distributed in the purest streams over the rest of the world, and descended to all succeeding ages? Were they not carried, in those great schools, to a degree of elegance and perfection, at which it is at least doubtful whether the moderns have yet arrived, or ever will? And yet in these very places, at a time when all the arts and sciences were in their full strength and maturity, it was then that those various inhumanities, which are by Christians held in the utmost abhorrence, were publicly authorized, and an ambitious, contentious, sanguinary disposition universally prevailed. It was then that almost every civil government was a kind of military establishment, was founded in violence and maintained by it; that wars were begun wantonly, conducted fiercely, and terminated inhumanly; that a passion for martial achievements, a lust of empire, an insatiable thirst of glory and conquest, filled the world with bloodshed and confusion. It was then that, in the very best institutions, the greatest part of the subjects enjoyed no liberty at all; and what the rest enjoyed, was purchased frequently at the expense of their repose, their humanity, and a great part of those social comforts which render liberty truly valuable. It was then that the courts of judicature (at Rome more especially) were inconceivably corrupt†; that the power both of the father and of the husband

* Voltaire de la Tolérance, ch. iv. p. 30. 34. 44.

† *Opinio omnium sermone percerebit in his judiciis que nunc sunt pecuni-
osum hominem quam vis sit nocens, nemi em posse dari. Cic. in Verrem.
Orat. 1.*

was carried beyond all bounds of lenity and utility ; that divorces were allowed for the most trivial causes ; that the education of children was unreasonably severe and rigorous ; that infants were sacrificed to views of policy ; that men were trained up to murder each other, for the entertainment of the spectators ; and that the happiest states were continually rent in pieces by the most violent dissensions, persecutions, and assassinations, which each party in its turn retorted on its adversaries, and always with redoubled fury and inhumanity.

If then the utmost perfection of philosophy and the fine arts was not able to tame the fierceness of ancient manners, nay, if they actually grew worse, in this and many other respects, in proportion to their advancement in learning and politeness, to what else but Christianity can it be owing, that scarce any considerable traces of this universal barbarity now remain among us ; that in domestic society, the ease and happiness of each individual, even the very lowest, is properly attended to ; that weakness of sex, tenderness of age, and humility of condition, instead of provoking insult, generally attract pity and protection ; that civil liberty is in our own country more firmly rooted, more equally diffused, more securely enjoyed ; that justice is most uprightly and impartially administered ; that the meanest of the people are as much under the protection of the laws as the most rich and powerful ; that the rage of universal empire is considerably abated, and the frequency, duration, and cruelty of wars greatly diminished ; that civil commotions more rarely happen, are attended commonly with fewer circumstances of inhumanity and horror, and have often proved favorable than fatal to liberty ; that the very worst dissensions in this country, have been “ less distinguished by atrocious deeds, either of treachery or cruelty, than were ever any intestine discords of so long continuance* ;” and that the two happiest changes we ever experienced, the *restoration*, and the *revolution*

* Hume's Hist. 4to. vol. v. p. 337.

were effected with very little interruption of public tranquillity, and were nothing more than *easy transitions*, not (as they would have been under Pagan or Mahometan governments) *horrible convulsions**? Compare all these amazing improvements in social happiness, since the introduction of Christianity, with the precepts and doctrines of that religion; consider their natural tendency to produce what actually has been produced, and then say whether you can hesitate one moment in ascribing these effects to the Gospel, as their sole or at least principal cause? What puts this matter almost beyond a doubt, is, that in those countries where the Christian revelation is yet unknown, the civil blessings enjoyed by Christianity are equally unknown. The miseries of their ancestors have descended to them with their superstitions, and bear a daily living testimony to the benevolence of our religion †. And it is no less remarkable, that the degree of perfection in which these advantages are enjoyed by any nation, is in general pretty nearly proportioned to the degree of purity in which the doctrines of the Gospel are there professed

* Some perhaps may be inclined to doubt the truth of one of the positions advanced above, *viz. that the frequency, duration, and cruelty of wars are less now than in ancient times.* But when we consider the immense armies successively raised and lost by the Asiatic monarchs; the endless contentions for sovereignty between the rival states of Greece; the prodigious numbers slain by Alexander the great; the sanguinary contests among his successors for upwards of 200 years; the continual scenes of bloodshed which Sicily exhibited for many centuries under its various tyrants; the incessant wars of the Romans with the Italian states, the Carthaginians, the Macedonians, Greeks, and various Eastern nations, the Spaniards, Gauls, Britains, and Germans, besides the shocking carnage of their own civil wars, so as to have been only three times in a state of peace, for a short interval, during almost seven centuries; when we reflect further, that it was no uncommon thing, in those ages, to see armies of 300,000 men in the field, of which sometimes the whole, frequently the greater part, and always a large part, fell in battle; and when to all this we add the incredible devastations made by the several barbarous hordes, that at different times burst forth in torrents from the North, and deluged Europe, Asia, and Africa with blood; we shall, perhaps, be inclined to think that Christianity has, upon the whole, already lessened the horrors and desolations of war in some degree, and that, as it comes to be better understood, and more generally embraced and practised, its pacific influence will be growing every day more visible and effectual.

† Let the reader only compare the present state of the Eastern and Western Indies, of Africa and China, of the Turkish and the Persian empires, and of all the late discovered islands, both in the northern and the southern hemisphere, with that of the Christian part of Europe, and he will have little reason to doubt the truth of what is here asserted,

and taught. Thus, for example (to produce only one instance out of a multitude) in those kingdoms, where there is no Christianity, there is no liberty. Where the superstitions and corruptions of Popery, have almost totally destroyed the simplicity of the Christian revelation, there too is liberty much obscured and depressed. Where some of those corruptions are thrown off, there some brighter gleams of liberty appear. Where the national religion approaches nearest to the native purity of the Gospel, there too civil liberty shines forth in its full lustre, and is carried to a degree of perfection, beyond which human weakness will not, perhaps, suffer it to be advanced.

III. Having dwelt so long on the first part of this discourse, *the beneficial influence of the Gospel on the peace and happiness of mankind*, there is the less time, and indeed the less necessity, to enlarge on the other, that is, *on the evidence which arises from hence of the divine goodness and mercy towards us*. For, since it has been shewn that Christ did in almost every sense of the word, *bring peace upon earth**; that he has made our peace with God, by taking upon him the sins of the whole world; that he has, in consequence of this, restored to us our peace of mind; that he has introduced peace and gentleness into the sentiments and the manners of men towards each other; and that, notwithstanding all the difficulties and disadvantages under which the Gospel has labored, the many violent passions it has had to struggle with, and the variety of obstacles which have impeded its operations, and counteracted its natural effects, it has nevertheless gradually and silently, yet effectually, advanced the peace and comfort of society; what need can there be of any further proof that the mission of Christ was a most striking instance of God's good-will to mankind?

Instead therefore of going about to prove what we all feel to be true, let me rather endeavor to inspire you with what I fear is not always felt as it ought to be, a proper warmth of gratitude and love for such unspeak-

* See Vitringa on Isaiah ii. 4.

able goodness. If you ask what return God expects for sending his Son into the world, let the Apostle answer you; "If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another*." An extensive, an active benevolence, is the tribute he demands from you; and when he makes *you* happy, the condition is no harder than this, that *you* should make *others* so. Let then your thankfulness be expressed in that best and most forcible of all languages, better, as St. Paul says, than the tongue of men and angels, CHARITY. Let it prompt you to every act of kindness and humanity towards your neighbor. In this there can be no dissimulation or disguise. Sacrifices may be offered by impure hands, and praises by dissembling or unmeaning lips. But he who relieves the indigent, instructs the ignorant, comforts the afflicted, protects the oppressed, conceals the faults he sees, and forgives the injuries he feels, affords a most convincing proof of his sincerity, an incontestible evidence of his gratitude to his heavenly benefactor. And be not afraid, I beseech you, of doing too much, of *over-paying* God's favors. After you have ranged through the whole field of duties, which charity lays open to you, the blessings you bestow will fall infinitely short of those you have received. Put then your abilities upon the stretch, to do all the good you can unto all men. But in a more especial manner, since it was one of the chief ends of Christ's mission *to bring peace upon earth*, let it be your great ambition to co-operate with him, as far as you are able, in this great design; let it be your constant study and delight to tread in the steps of your blessed Master, and to contribute every thing in your power towards completing that great and god-like work of *giving peace to man*. "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and clamor, and evil-speaking, be put away from among you, with all malice; and be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, hath forgiven you†."

* John iv. 11.

† Ephesians iv. 31, 32.