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→ SERMONS ←

THE RANK OF PREACHING IN THE PLAN OF JESUS.*

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And He said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature.
—MARK xvi., 15.

THE design of Jesus was to build a kingdom of God upon earth. It was not necessary that He should found a kingdom of God in Heaven, for it already existed there in full and perfect form. His method was first so to penetrate individual souls with His own temper and disposition as that He should become their spiritual leader; and then, by a natural process of spiritual affinity, to gather them into a common society. This society, or Church, or kingdom, was in its turn to affect the life of the world, at first slowly, silently, almost imperceptibly; as the leaven the meal; ethically and spiritually always, but surely and universally, until at last, as He counts time with whom a thousand years are as a single day, the race should be renovated and restored to the perfect love and righteousness of God, and should amply reflect His radiant, resplendent, eternal glory. This was the high, calm, and singular purpose of Jesus of Nazareth. History offers no account of any other person ever proposing such a gigantic task, such a sublime work!

Upon what human agency or means did He chiefly rely for the accomplishment of this great work? So far as He laid under contribution human

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✠ Summer Service ✠

THE ANGELS OF THE GRASS.

BY T. DE WITT TALMAGE, D.D. (PRESBYTERIAN).

If then God so clothe the grass, which is to-day in the field and to-morrow is cast into the oven, how much more will He clothe you.—LUKE xii., 28.

THE lily is the queen of Bible flowers. The rose may have disputed her throne in modern times and won it, but the rose originally had only five petals. It was under the long-continued and intense gaze of the world that the rose blushed into its present beauty. In the Bible train, cassia and hyssop and frankincense and myrrh and spikenard and camphire and the rose follow the lily. Fourteen times in the Bible is the lily mentioned; only twice the rose. The rose may now have wider empire, but the lily reigned in the time of Esther, in the time of Solomon, in the time of Christ.

Cæsar had his throne on the hills. The lily had her throne in the valley. In the greatest sermon that was ever preached, there was only one flower, and that a lily. The Bedford dreamer, John Bunyan, entered the House of the Interpreter, and was shown a cluster of flowers, and was told to "consider the lilies."

We may study or reject other sciences at our option. It is so with astronomy, it is so with chemistry, it is so with jurisprudence, it is so with physiology, it is so with geology; but the science of botany Christ commands us to study when He says: "Consider the lilies." Measure them from root to the tip of petal. Inhale their breath. Notice the gracefulness of their poise. Hear the whispers of the white lips of the Eastern and the red lips of the American lily.

Belonging to this royal family of lilies is the lily of the Nile, the Japan lily, the Lady Washington of the Sierras, the Golden Band lily, the Giant lily of Nepaul, the Turk's Cap lily, the African lily from the Cape of Good Hope. All these lilies have the royal blood in their veins. But I take the lilies of my text this morning as typical of all flowers, and this Easter day, garlanded with all this opulence of floral beauty, seems to address us, saying, "Consider the lilies, consider the azalias, consider the fuchsias, consider the geraniums, consider the ivys, consider the hyacinths, consider the heliotropes, consider the oleanders." With deferential and grateful and intelligent and worshipful souls, consider them. Not with insipid sentimentalism or with sophomoric vaporing, but for grand and practical and everyday, and, if need be, homely uses, consider them.

The flowers are the angels of the grass. They all have voices. When the clouds speak, they thunder; when the whirlwinds speak, they scream; when the cataracts speak, they roar; but when the flowers speak, they always whisper. I stand here to interpret their message. What have you to say, O ye angels of the grass, to this worshipful multitude?

This morning I mean to discuss what flowers are good for. That is my subject—what are flowers good for?

I. I remark, in the first place, they are good for lessons of God's providential care. That was Christ's first thought. All these flowers seem to address us to-day, saying: "God will give you apparel and food. We have no wheel with which to spin, no loom with which to weave, no sickle with which to harvest, no well-sweep with which to draw water; but God slakes our thirst with the dew, and God feeds us with the bread of the sunshine, and God has apparelled us with more than Solomon's regality. We are prophetesses of adequate wardrobe. If God so clothed us, the grass of the field, will He not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?"

Men and women of worldly anxieties, take this message home with you. How long has God taken care of you? Quarter of the journey of life? half the journey of life? three-quarters the journey of life? Can you not trust Him the rest of the way? God does not promise you anything like that which the Roman Emperor had on his table at vast expense—500 nightingale's tongues—but He has promised to take care of you. He has promised you the necessities, not the luxuries—bread, not cake. If God so luxuriantly clothes the grass of the field, will He not provide for you, His living and immortal children? He will.

No wonder Martin Luther always had a flower on his writing-desk for inspiration. Through the cracks of the prison floor a flower grew up to cheer an Italian patriot. Mungo Park, the great traveller and explorer, had his life saved by a flower. He sank down in the desert to die, but seeing a flower near by, it suggested God's merciful care, and he got up with new courage and travelled on to safety. I said the flowers are the angels of the grass. I add now they are the evangelists of the sky.

II. If you insist on asking me the question, What are flowers good for? I respond, they are good for the bridal day. The bride must have them on her brow, and she must have them in her hand. The marriage altar must be covered with them. A wedding without flowers would be as inappropriate as a wedding without music. At such a time they are for congratulation and prophecies of good. So much of the pathway of life is covered up with thorns, we ought to cover the beginning with orange blossoms.

Flowers are appropriate on such occasions, for in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases it is the very best thing that could have happened. The world may criticise and pronounce it an inaptitude, and may lift its eyebrows in surprise and think it might suggest something better; but the God who sees the twenty, forty, fifty years of wedded life before they have begun arranges all for the best. So that flowers, in almost all cases, are appropriate for the marriage day. The divergencies of disposition will become correspondences, recklessness will become prudence, frivolity will be turned into practicality.

There has been many an aged widowed soul who had a carefully locked bureau, and in the bureau a box, and in the box a folded paper, and in the folded paper a half-blown rose, slightly fragrant, discolored, carefully pressed

She put it there forty or fifty years ago. On the anniversary day of her wedding she will go to the bureau, she will lift the box, she will unfold the paper, and to her eyes will be exposed the half-blown bud, and the memories of the past will rush upon her, and a tear will drop upon the flower; and suddenly it is transfigured, and there is a stir in the dust of the anther, and it rounds out and it is full of life and it begins to tremble in the procession up the church aisle and the dead music of a half-century ago comes throbbing through the air and vanished faces reappear and right hands are joined and a manly voice promises "I will for better or for worse," and the wedding march thunders a salvo of joy at the departing crowd; but a sigh on that anniversary day scatters the scene. Under the deep-fetched breath, the altar, the flowers, the congratulating groups are scattered, and there is nothing left but a trembling hand holding a faded rosebud, which is put into the paper and then into the box, and the box carefully placed in the bureau, and with a sharp, sudden click of the lock the scene is over.

Ah, my friends, let not the prophecies of the flowers on your wedding day be false prophecies. Be blind to each other's faults. Make the most of each other's excellences. Above all do not both get mad at once! Remember the vows, the ring on the third finger of the left hand, and the benediction of the calla lilies.

III. If you insist on asking me the question: What are flowers good for? I answer, they are good to honor and comfort the obsequies. The worst gash ever made into the side of our poor earth is the gash of the grave. It is so deep, it is so cruel, it is so incurable that it needs something to cover it up. Flowers for the casket, flowers for the hearse, flowers for the cemetery.

What a contrast between a grave in a country churchyard, with the fence broken down and the tombstone aslant, and the neighboring cattle browsing amid the mullein stalks, and the Canada thistles, and a June morning in Greenwood, the wave of roseate bloom rolling to the top of the mounds, and then breaking into foaming crests of white flowers all around the pillows of dust. It is the difference between sleeping under rags and sleeping under an embroidered blanket. We want Old Mortality with his chisel to go through all the graveyards of Christendom, and while he carries a chisel in one hand we want Old Mortality to have some flower seed in the palm of the other hand.

"Oh," you say, "the dead don't know; it makes no difference to them." I think you are mistaken. There are not so many steamers and rail trains coming to any living city as there are convoys coming from Heaven to earth; and if there be instantaneous and constant communication between this world and the better world, do you not suppose your departed friends know what you do with their bodies? Why has God planted "golden rod" and wild flowers in the forest and on the prairie where no human eye ever sees them? He planted them there for invisible intelligences to look at and admire, and when invisible intelligences come to look at the wild-flowers of the woods and the tablelands, will they not make excursion and see the flowers which you have planted in affectionate remembrance of them?

When I am dead I would like to have a handful of violets—anyone could pluck them out of the grass, or some one could lift from the edge of the pond a water lily—nothing rarely expensive or insane display, as sometimes at funeral rites where the display takes the bread from the children's mouths and the clothes from their backs, but something from the great democracy of flowers. Rather than imperial catafalque of Russian Czar, I ask some one whom I may have helped by gospel sermon or Christian deed, to bring a sprig of arbutus or a handful of China asters.

It was left for modern times to spell respect for the departed and comfort for the living in letters of floral gospel. Pillow of flowers meaning rest for the pilgrim who has got to the end of his journey. Anchor of flowers suggesting the Christian hope which we have as an anchor to the soul, sure and steadfast. Cross of flowers suggesting the tree on which our sins were slain.

If I had my way I would cover up all the dreamless sleepers, whether in golden-handled casket or pine box, whether a king's mausoleum or Potter's Field, with radiant and aromatic arborescence. The Bible says, in the midst of the garden there was a sepulchre. I wish that every sepulchre might be in the midst of a garden.

IV. If you insist on asking me the question, What are flowers good for? I answer, for religious symbolism. Have you ever studied scriptural flora? The Bible is an arboretum, it is a divine conservatory, it is a herbarium of exquisite beauty. If you want to illustrate the brevity of the brightest human life, you will quote from Job: "A man cometh forth as a flower and is cut down." Or you will quote from the Psalmist: "As the flower of the field, so he perisheth; the wind passeth over it and it is gone." Or you will quote from Isaiah: "All flesh is grass, and the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field." Or you will quote from James the Apostle: "As the flower of the grass, so he passeth away." What graphic Bible symbolism!

All the cut flowers of this Easter day will soon be dead, whatever care you take of them. Though morning and night you baptize them in the name of the shower, the baptism will not be to them a saving ordinance. They have been fatally wounded with the knife that cut them. They are bleeding their life away; they are dying now. The fragrance in the air is their departing and ascending spirits.

Oh yes! flowers are almost human. Botanists tell us that flowers breathe, they take nourishment, they eat, they drink, they are sensitive, they have their likes and dislikes, they sleep, they wake, they live in families, they have their ancestors and their descendants, their birth, their burial, their cradle, their grave. The zephyr rocks the one, and the storm digs the trench for the other. The cowslip must leave its gold, the lily must leave its silver, the rose must leave its diamond necklace of morning dew. Dust to dust. So we come up, we prosper, we spread abroad, we die, as the flower—as the flower!

Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me!

Flowers also afford mighty symbolism of Christ, who compared Himself to

the ancient queen, the lily, and the modern queen, the rose, when He said: "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys." Redolent like the one, humble like the other. Like both, appropriate for the sad who want sympathizers, and for the rejoicing who want banqueters. Hovering over the marriage ceremony like a wedding bell, or folded like a chaplet on the pulseless heart of the dead.

Oh, Christ! Let the perfume of Thy name be wafted all around the earth—lily and rose, lily and rose—until the wilderness crimson into a garden, and the round earth turn into one great bud of immortal beauty laid against the warm heart of God. Snatch down from the world's banners eagle and lion, and put on lily and rose, lily and rose.

But, my friends, flowers have no grander use than when on Easter morning we celebrate the reanimation of Christ from the catacombs. All the flowers of to-day spell resurrection. There is not a nook or corner in all the building but is touched with the incense. The women carried spices to the tomb of Christ, and they dropped spices all around about the tomb, and from those spices have grown all the flowers of Easter morn. The two white-robed angels that hurled the stone away from the door of the tomb, hurled it with such violence down the hill that it crashed in the door of the world's sepulchre and millions of the stark and dead shall come forth.

However labyrinthian the mausoleum, however costly the sarcophagus, however architecturally grand the necropolis, however beautifully parterred the family grounds, we want them all broken up by the Lord of the resurrection. The forms that we laid away with our broken hearts must rise again. Father and mother—they must come out. Husband and wife—they must come out. Brothers and sisters—they must come out. Our darling children—they must come out. The eyes that with trembling fingers we closed must open in the lustre of resurrection morn. The arms that we folded in death must join ours in embrace of reunion. The beloved voice that was hushed must be returned. The beloved form must come up without its infirmities, without its fatigues—must come up.

Oh, how long it seems for some of you. Waiting—waiting for the resurrection. How long! how long! I make for your broken hearts to-day a cool, soft bandage of Easter lilies. Last night we had come in the mails a beautiful Easter card, on the top of it a representation of that exquisite flower called the "trumpet creeper," and under it the inscription: "The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised." I comfort you this day with the thought of resurrection.

When Lord Nelson was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, the heart of all England was stirred. The procession passed on amid the sobbing of a nation. There were thirty trumpeters stationed at the door of the cathedral, with instruments of music in hand, waiting for the signal, and when the illustrious dead arrived at the gates of St. Paul's cathedral, these thirty trumpeters gave one united blast, and then all was silent. Yet the trumpets did not wake the dead. He slept right on.

But I have to tell you, what thirty trumpeters could not do for one man, one trumpeter will do for all nations. The ages have rolled on, and the clock of the world's destiny strikes nine, ten, eleven, twelve, and time shall be no longer!

Behold the archangel hovering. He takes the trumpet, points it this way, puts its lips to his lips, and then blows one long, loud, terrific, thunderous, reverberating and resurrectionary blast. Look! Look! They rise! The dead! The dead! Some coming forth from the family vault. Some from the city cemetery. Some from the graveyard. Here a spirit is joined to its body, and there another spirit is joined to another body, and millions of departed spirits are assorting the bodies and then reclothing themselves in forms now radiant for ascension.

The earth begins to burn—the bonfire of a great victory. All ready now for the procession of reconstructed humanity. Upward and away! Christ leads and all the Christian dead follow, battalion after battalion, nation after nation. Up, up! On, on! Forward, ye ranks of God Almighty! Lift up your heads, ye everlasting gates, and let the conquerors come in! Resurrection! Resurrection!

And so I twist all the festal flowers of this church with all the festal flowers of chapels and cathedrals of all Christendom into one great chain, and with that chain I bind the Easter morning of 1888 with the closing Easter of the world's history—Resurrection! May the God of peace that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that Great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do His will.

TWO IMPERATIVE DUTIES OF THE CHURCH (*Arise! Shine!*—ISA. lx., 1).—Part of the prophetic song of the latter day glory. The song fitly begins with the first glory of the day—the rising of the sun. It is a call to the Church. Each word is significant. “Arise” points to the duty springing out of special circumstances. “Shine,” to the permanent duty. The Church should shine in three ways. I. By the light of Truth. The beams of Divine Knowledge should radiate forth from the Church to lighten every land. II. By the light of Righteousness—Right living. It must be more than orthodox in creed. It must be holy in life and spirit. III. By the light of Charity. The world is full of selfishness and malevolence. The Church must show that it is founded in and regulated by the heavenly law of love. It must exhibit the Communion of Saints. The other imperative is “Arise.” 1. As the rising of the sun. The sun illuminates all lands but not simultaneously—He rises on this continent then on that. So the Church having received the light should carry it to the regions of darkness that they may be enlightened. 2. A call to go forth from obscurity into publicity—truth must be proclaimed on the house-top. 3. A call to relight a luminary whose light has gone out. A call to nominal Christians, to a lapsed people—He who gives the call, gives the power to rise.—*Prof. J. K. Bruce (United Presbyterian), Glasgow.*