

THE HOMILETIC REVIEW

AUGUST, 1905

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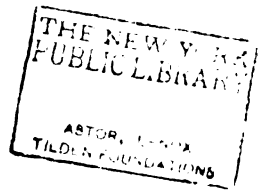
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EDITORIAL COMMENT

THE movement to endow churches—a movement to which we have had occasion to refer before—is one that seems to find increasing favor in many quarters. The entire subject was investigated last year by the American Institute for Social Service, whose report is summarized in "Social Progress" for 1905. This report states that endowments to the amount of about \$4,500,000 exist, representing "more than fifty churches" investigated by the "Institute." The investigation presumably was not complete. Inquiry was made as to the period of time in each case the endowment had been held, whether it was restricted as to its use, and what its effects had been on the benevolences and general spiritual life of the churches. From the answers received the following generalizations were reached:

"1. A majority of the churches reporting endowments are seeking to increase these endowments, thus expressing their judgment that on the whole they are desirable. 2. A complete endowment has a paralyzing effect on the church possessing it. 3. Whether a partial endowment is desirable or otherwise depends on the use that is made of the funds and the location and strength of the church."

The golden mean, according to this report, is an endowment large enough and so properly restricted as to assure

the perpetuity and usefulness of the institution, without relieving the living donors and contributors in the membership from any part of their full responsibility. It is suggestive that the investigation should discover that in some instances an endowment operated to "paralyze" the energies of the church.

DURING the reign of the dog-star many preachers on vacation are supplying churches away from home. This is the usual opportunity to air favorite views and flowing rhetorical periods. But it is a process not to be overdone. For one thing, most of the favorite sermons are eloquent and long—especially long. Dog-star weather and long sermons make a serious combination. True, some one has affirmed that there is no gage for sermons—"they should be as long as a string and as short as a piece of chalk." But the minister is in a sense a guest. Tho he must be treated politely, should he not have consideration in turn for a perspiring congregation on a hot summer's night? Why should not the vacation "supply" take along with him in his "grip" or in his head a half-dozen cool sermons calculated to come well within the half-hour length? "Lessons from the Iceberg,"

SERMONS AND ADDRESSES

WHAT IS MAN?*

BY HENRY VAN DYKE, D.D., LL.D., PRESBYTERIAN, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?—Psalm viii. 8, 4.

WHAT IS MAN?

I suppose there is no question which has been asked so often and none which has received such different answers. It is of perennial interest, the one subject about which every man likes to ask himself, and there is no curiosity so intense and lasting. It has been asked all through history. The burden of philosophical and scientific inquiry is this: What is man? A great many people are a little anxious and nervous about some of the answers that are coming to this question. One answer connected with the evolutionary hypothesis gives some people a great deal of anxiety and distress. Not me. Whatever the result of careful scientific investigation may be, I am sure of two things—dead sure. The first is that no scientific theory can assign a more humble origin to man's physical nature than that which is already assigned by the Scripture. The Lord God made man of the dust of the earth. That is lower even than protoplasm. The first man is of the earth, earthy. And, on the other hand, I am quite sure that no scientific theory will permanently endure which makes this lowly origin, and this relationship to the inanimate world, a blot on the spiritual glory, and a bar to the lofty destiny, of the human race. God made man in His own image, and gave him dominion over all creatures. You may know the wild animals and the tame vegetables, but never make the mistake of supposing that you are not superior to them. You are made in God's image: "Now are we the sons of God and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

These two elements, the physical insignificance and spiritual greatness, a nature in which weakness and strength are blended, must be taken into consideration in any true

answer to the question, What is man? Now I shall ask you to observe this morning the form in which the consideration of this question takes in the mind of the Psalmist. The text gives us, first, a confession of the littleness of humanity when compared with the works of nature; and, secondly, an assertion of the dignity of humanity, because God has visited and raised and revealed Himself into it. You will observe that in the case of the Psalmist this sense of man's littleness is called forth by the thoughtful and reverent contemplation of the works of nature: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained." How profound, how accurate, how true to life is this record of experience! The world of human society is like a machine, with its wheels and cogs bound together, and we take our place either as a cog, a wheel, or else as a hub; and sometimes the cog mistakes itself for the hub, and we say, like the fly upon the chariot-wheel, "My, what a dust we make!" Great day! great race! great country! all great! but when we go out of our little routine circle of human achievements and human efforts and contemplate the works of nature in their beauty and in their grandeur, then we begin to feel after all that there is something beyond us of which we are only a part, and a small part. The sight of the works of human skill and power, the triumphs of man's genius, in art or industry, is calculated to produce a sentiment of pride and self-sufficiency in us. You remember the old story of the artist, standing before the works of Titian, who said: "I, too, am a painter"—*Io anche sono pittore*. Standing beneath the majestic arches of Westminster Abbey we remember that human hands reared it, and we remember on looking at tablet and monument the names of the men who have filled the earth with their writings and stories—Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare—and we rejoice to find that the sweet singer of our own land (Longfellow) has been borne in mind—a bard whom Americans are trying to

* Stenographically reported for THE HOMILETIC REVIEW.

forget, but whom Englishmen have remembered among that splendid gathering. And as one stands there, there is a feeling of pride and exaltation, and he says: "I also have a share in this glory; I, too, am a member of this Anglo-Saxon race"—a race which now rules a third of the civilized world, and is destined to make its dominion complete and its language universal. Such feelings are natural, perhaps inevitable, to one who stands within the temple of fame of the English-speaking race. Do they not bring every one a sense of pride and self-confidence? Yet I think that a careful observation of the natural trend of history shows that American boastfulness is simply English arrogance without its dress-suit. I think that an unprejudiced judgment will teach us that it is better to be humble than exalted; and it is this effect which is produced upon the healthy human mind by the contemplation of the beautiful and the sublime in nature. The vision of the primeval forest, such as I saw a few weeks ago in California, with its massive pillars arching up as if to support the very dome of heaven itself, pillars which had stood in those parts doubtless since the days of Moses; the high arched roof of interwoven branches and long-drawn avenues and the holy shade through which one hears the wind whisper like the sound of many voices; or again a snow-capped group of gigantic mountains lifting their pinnacles against the azure of the sky; or again the wide circle of the sea, with its mighty and ever-moving meadows of sapphire rising and falling like a thing of life, yet ever keeping the level floor upon which falls the light of the sun and stars—how the sight of these things makes us feel man's littleness! Or the first day out at sea out of sight of the land! How the very ship which seemed to you like a floating city almost shrinks to a plaything among the waves! All these glories and wonders of nature existed long before there was a human eye to behold them, and they will endure after every human eye is closed in death. They are nature's triumphs. They are the natural. God thought them; and if we compare what is done by God and nature without effort, what are all the mightiest efforts of humanity? Of a truth, when we behold these things, we ask amazedly, What is man?

But it has come home to me with great force of late that the particular experience which called forth this exclamation of the

Psalmist was not the sight of the wonders of the sea, or land, or mountain, but the glory which is visible to all men everywhere. "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained"! You do not have to cross the ocean, or travel to a far-off land, or climb the lofty mountains to behold the mighty spectacle of the starry sky. You can look up from the crowded city streets and see their majestic fires spangling the blue canopy; you may lift up your eyes and hearts to consider the beauty of the heavens.

Consider, further, that all these heavenly fires whirl in intricate courses! Consider their distance from us! The light of some of them has taken thousands of years to reach the earth, and if we could follow that light backward, we should see the history of the world. Nay, if this whole world of ours were suddenly consumed, it would be an event of less importance in the universe than the fall of a single leaf in Central Park, or the loss of a single grain of sand. Watch the sky and you will be like the Psalmist, impressed with the insignificance of man.

The text has a twofold aspect. The Psalmist reflects upon the insignificance of man, and he marvels also at the divine goodness. "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" Here is the great wonder, that the mighty Maker of all things should fix His tenderest love and care upon the feeble inhabitant of this little planet; that He visits him among the vast concerns of the universe, and draws us toward Him. This is what we can never understand, but which we must always remember and rejoice in. God has made this natural world in such a way that it supports our physical life and ministers to our spiritual necessities. The great stars which shed their splendor upon us like rain are not conscious of their beauty:

God thought, and lo! before He spake the word
The darkness understood not, tho it heard;
But man looks up to where the splendors swim
And thinks God's thought of glory after Him.

God made the stars beautiful that they might appeal to us and put solemn thought into our hearts. The same splendors are mirrored in the eyes of the lion as he prowls through the desert, and in the eyes of the watchdog as he bays at the moon; but the dumb beasts do not

behold what we see, and they do not know what we understand. We alone, as far as we have any clear evidence, are responsive to the mystic influences of these celestial beauties. For us alone they declare the divine glory, and thus we feel that we were not made for them, but they for us.

It is something for us to remember that in this revelation of God in nature, God is ever drawing us near to Him in the spiritual world. Think what this life of ours would be if this spiritual element were lacking; if we never felt the thrill of virtuous resolve; if we never heard the vast spirit within calling us to struggle upward; if we never caught a glimpse of the divine excellence shining far above us and drawing us to itself! All the true glory of human existence lies in the fact that the heart does respond to them. Love and the effort to do something noble in life are the jewels of humanity. The history of mankind derives its significance and worth from the fact that God is moving in it, training, developing, and redeeming the race. Life draws all its meaning and value from the truth that God is mindful of us, and visits us from day to day. If life were merely eating and drinking it might be otherwise, but the great Spirit that is our Father feeds our deepest needs, educates our noblest traits, disciplines our follies, fitting us for His imperishable glories that are to come. That is man. Then how glorious and excellent a thing is it to be alive!

And once more it is something for us to remember that God has visited man in the flesh; that He has come to this earth and dwelt here with us as a friend, a brother, and a savior. Verily and in truth Bethlehem Ephratah was blessed among the cities of Judah, because the prince of Israel was born there; and tho it were least among the cities, His splendor and glory make it shining beyond all the stars, because it is the scene of the incarnation of the love and of the Son of God. Nowhere else in the universe is there a life like ours; or if there be anywhere among those shining wondrous orbs of heaven, of worlds on worlds, a life like ours, then on that orb too I believe that God has come, and that the divine love has been incarnated; but so far as we know from the men who search and study the heavens, in all this wide star-sown field, this earth is the only place that is fitted for the development of anything that we understand by life; and if that be so, that is the reason why among all the majestic suns this

little planet was chosen for the scene of the birth of the love, and of the Son of God; because here was man, of whom God is mindful, and whom God visited. That wondrous glory drew near to us as a friend, a brother, and a savior, one in whom the divine glory was manifested in perfect character and heroic life, and in a singular death-destroying resurrection. In this flesh which crumbles, in a life so brief, here, in this very flesh, purity and love and self-sacrifice, and all those highest and most desirable virtues were perfected in the life of the Son of God, and the son of man, for He took not on Him the nature of angels; but He took on Him the seed of Abraham; wherefore in all things it behooved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.

Now I think I begin to feel the answer to the question of the text, What is man? Man is God's child. Therefore God has set His heart upon him and visited him every day. In the house of the rich man there are many treasures: rare books, costly pictures, splendid marbles, shining gems; but the little child which bears His image and likeness, and that looks up into His face with smiling love, and that answers to His affections with tender heart, is the dearest jewel of them all. And there is no man or woman who would not see the great house blotted out by fire, and every treasure absolutely destroyed rather than that harm should come to one hair of that little golden head. In the great house of God there are many treasures and jewels: stars and planets, suns and moons, but above them all God values His human child. More than all, He cares for you and me, because He has made us in His likeness, and He daily woos us to love and serve and worship Him. There is an old hymn which says, "I want to be an angel." That is a second-class wish. There is something far better than to be an angel. I had far rather be a child that has wandered from Him in sin, and be among those whom He has loved, whom He has redeemed, and called back to Himself; whom He has taken into His own fellowship, and into His own school in order, if possible, to make the best out of frail human nature, and at last, I know, to be with Him in glory and in peace, purified and ransomed, and to dwell with Him forever. My friends, that is our birthright. Will you sell it for a mess of pottage?