

SERMONS FOR THE
CHRISTIAN YEAR

BY

THE REVEREND JOHN KEBLE

SERMON XXXV.
WHY THE WITNESS OF GOD IS REJECTED.
TRINITY SUNDAY.
S. JOHN iii. 11.

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen, and ye receive not our witness."

THESE are the words of the eternal Son of God, describing the manner in which His witness, and the witness of His Holy Spirit, would be too generally treated in the world. That behaviour, He says, would be boldly practised towards Him, which men can least endure, when practised towards themselves. His positive declarations would be treated as falsehoods: His words of earnest advice and warning taken no more notice of, by many, than if they had never been spoken at all.

Now, men know what they feel when they are used in that way, even by those who are as wise and as good as themselves. They cannot very soon forget or pass it over. How then can they think, without trembling, of behaving in the same disrespectful way to the Eternal Father, to the Judge of quick and dead, to the Almighty Spirit, in Whom they and all creatures live, and move, and have their being?

They cannot suppose that God Almighty is, as it were, too high above us to care how we behave towards Him. For He has warned us in so many words, "Them that honour Me, I will honour; and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed." That is, they who turn their thoughts, seriously and humbly, to the message of their God, brought from heaven by His Son Christ Jesus, and sealed afterwards by the gift of His Holy Spirit; those He will always bear in mind; they will find Him a kind and merciful God; they will have His blessing both in this world and in the next. But on the other hand, "surely He scorneth the scorners:" they who will not remember Him, will find themselves left without Him in the world; and how then can ever anything turn out well and happily to them?

Neither can the scorners of the Almighty pretend, that the things, which He teaches and they refuse to hear, are such as do not nearly concern themselves. On the contrary, the witness of the Son of God, the Gospel, of which He speaks in the text, contains in it all the particulars, on which depend the life, being, and happiness of every one, both here and hereafter.

Can any thing possibly concern you more than to know, that you "have an immortal soul, a living spirit which never can die, and a body which will rise again

after death, never more to return to corruption? And further, that God Himself has prepared for this soul and body of yours a home of everlasting peace and joy: things more blessed than eye ever saw, or ear heard, or than ever entered into man's heart to conceive? These truths, by His Gospel, our Saviour brought to light. Before Him, they might be darkly guessed at by a few good and wise men: now they are known for certain facts by every child in a Christian country. Can you, dare you, pretend for a moment, that the certain knowledge of these things makes no difference to you? Can you, dare you say, you have any excuse for running after wild and low pleasures, in order to drown the cares and sorrows of the world, now that your Maker has made known to you a place of eternal comfort and recompense? Can you, dare you plead, when vexed and disappointed, that you "do well to be angry, even unto death," now that your eyes are divinely opened, and you have it in your power, if you will, to look on, over a very few years, to a place where "there will be no sorrow, nor crying, and where "God shall wipe away all tears from your eyes?"

But Jesus Christ brought also to light the doctrine of eternal death: the chief evil, as well as the chief good. They who live within reach of His Gospel are inexcusable if they do not know how grievously they and all mankind are fallen from that righteousness in which God created them; if they do not think much of the danger they are in, lest they lose their souls for ever and ever. "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the people that forget God." Surely, however painful it may be, it must be good for a man to know this. Having been once informed of it by our Saviour, we cannot be as if we had never heard of it.

If, indeed, no more had been revealed to man, than that there is a portion in heaven provided for him by God Almighty, but that he, through sin, is in great danger of missing that happiness, and falling into a place where "their worm dieth not; and the fire is not quenched:" if God had only made known to us our condition, without distinctly telling us how it may be bettered, something might have been said for spiritual doubtfulness and despondency, though nothing at all for wilful sin and disobedience. But, in His infinite and unspeakable mercy, He has told us much more than this: He has not only set life and death clearly before us, but has said distinctly, "Choose life," and has taught us how to do so effectually. This is, emphatically, the Gospel of Christ; namely, the way, revealed by Him from heaven, by which lost and undone sinners may return, if they will, to their heavenly Father; may put off their sin, and save their souls alive. All which our Lord has fully revealed to us, by instructing us in God Almighty's method of dealing with us by His Son and Spirit.

First, whereas all mankind were guilty, before God, of deadly sin, all had sinned, and come short of His glory; He has revealed to us, in His Son Christ Jesus, the only Name by which it is possible for a sinner to obtain forgiveness of the past. The Son of Man has been lifted up in our sight, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. The Son, which is the Word of God, begotten from everlasting of the Father, Very and eternal God, of one Substance with the Father; He has taken our nature upon Him, has suffered what we deserved, and has purchased for us what we never can deserve; pardon and favour from a just and holy God.

Will any man say, "These are great and high matters: they may be true, but I do not understand them, and why should I trouble myself about them?" If there be any such person, I can only answer him by another question. Suppose you were a drowning man, and your best friend came in sight, endangering his own life to help you, and shewing how you might make sure of deliverance, if you would only look, and try to move, towards him with a steady confidence in what he told you. Would that be "no concern of yours?" Would you refuse all attention to him, because you could not exactly make out all that he was saying and doing on your behalf?

Yet, if we are Christians at all, we must believe that this is but a faint representation of the mercy made known to us on the Cross, and our great need of it. We must believe, that Jesus Christ is now and evermore our Saviour; that He has bought us with His own Blood, to be His, both soul and body, for ever; and, if we have any sense at all of gratitude for unutterable love, or any fear at all of the unutterable misery, which that love, slighted, is sure to bring after it, we must think ourselves more concerned in this, than we can possibly be in any thing else: we must see, that it is no high matter, fit for scholars only to consider, but plain common sense and common gratitude, which tells us, that Christ having "died for all," we must not henceforth live unto ourselves, but unto Him Who died for us, and rose again.

And how are we to live to, or for Him? In the same sort of way, as when a dutiful child is said to live to, or for his parent, or an affectionate wife to, or for her husband, by looking to Him habitually and continually, and making it the business of our life to please Him.

But how is this possible to be done, considering the frail bodies we have, the corrupt world we live in, and the bad habits, most contrary to His will, which too many of us are got into? These are sad and true considerations; and yet it is possible for us to please God; for hear the other part of the witness of His Son,

the good tidings which He brought from heaven. "I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever: even the Spirit of Truth."

The Holy Ghost, Who is very and eternal God, of one Substance with the Father, proceeding from the Father and the Son, He is ever present with Christians, strengthening them, in the absence of their Redeemer, to walk, by faith in Him, so as to please God. He is ready with His helping hand, to lift our thoughts above earthly things, and fix them on the Son of God, Who ought to be all in all to us. He is ready to bless our prayers and Communion, our good and humble thoughts and purposes, by making us gradually purer and purer, more and more fit to be received into heaven.

If any one can be found who is careless about these blessings, (and it must be with shame acknowledged, that a great many seem as if they never had "heard whether there be any Holy Ghost,") they must be careless of all divine things; they do not mind whether they are saved or lost: but those who think on this doctrine at all, must allow, that it supplies all a Christian need know, all the help he need ask. Whether he be rich or poor, learned or ignorant, the assistance of this Holy Spirit may be obtained by him, on sincerely praying for it. And when men once know this, one is as capable as another of perceiving, what of course must be his own duty. The simplest may understand as clearly as the wisest, that the nearer God's Spirit comes to him, to help him in well-doing, the more shameful and intolerable is his conduct, if he go on still in his sins.

Such is the witness of Jesus Christ, of which He was speaking to Nicodemus, when He said, men would not receive it, though made known to them on the most certain of all evidence. "We speak that We do know, and testify that We have seen, and ye receive not Our witness."

You have heard the substance of what was spoken, that is, of the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour; and have seen how very nearly the whole of it concerns every one of us. Observe now, who those are that speak, and judge whether it can be safe to disregard them.

The Gospel, by which God speaks to us Christians, was not, like former messages, entrusted to prophets and Angels only: no, not to the highest Archangel in heaven. But "God, Who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son;" His only Begotten, One with Himself in Nature and in Glory. He did not only come among us, in His good time, but actually became one of us; "was made Man;" condescended to all our innocent infirmities; to thirst and

hunger; to weariness and painfulness; to shame and sorrow; to wounds and death; and all this, though He was continually in the habit of working the most astonishing miracles, enlightening the blind, cleansing the lepers, and raising the dead to life. It is no great thing surely that we ask, when we entreat you, for your souls' sake, not to turn a deaf ear to a message thus recommended to you: when we beg you to believe that, to prove which, Christ rose from the dead; and to have some care of those souls, to save which, He came down from heaven.

Again, when the Son of God, having ended all His humiliation, was to return to the Right Hand of His Father; when He was to take to Him His great power, and rule over the world and the Church, He did not trust us to His Apostles only, nor to any of the Angels in heaven, but He sent to us the Holy Ghost the Comforter, to be, in His stead, God's witness of eternal things. That gracious and condescending Spirit has ever since, night and day, in all corners of the Christian world, been endeavouring to turn the hearts of men, and prevail on them to regard the things which belong unto their peace; first, by the mighty works and wonderful prophecies of the Apostles and early Christians; and, in all following times, by the godly motions which He puts into men's minds, when they rightly use the Scriptures and the Sacraments; by the good examples which He raises up, and the holy lessons which He teaches, in the Church.

Do not imagine it can be a light thing, an excusable oversight, to slight the witness of the Spirit. He bears long with us; but He will "not always strive with man." The greater and more continual His condescension now, so much the more frightful and hopeless, be sure, will their sentence prove at last, who shall be found to have received such unspeakable grace in vain.

Yet our Saviour gives us to understand, that such, too commonly, would be the case: "We speak that We do know, and testify that We have seen, and ye receive not Our witness." So it was in our Saviour's days, and so, too often, it is now. The Holy, Blessed, and Glorious Trinity, Three Persons and One God, comes down, as it were, from heaven, with all His glorious attributes, to bear witness of the way of salvation, and men refuse to receive His witness; to be redeemed, renewed, saved by Him.

This is often, perhaps most often, done as a mere matter of course. Men take, as it were, their full swing of the world, indulge themselves without scruple in every passion of their corrupt hearts, and never so much as ask themselves why. When you do get them to think a little of religion, especially when they are put in mind, as on this day, of the Catholic Faith, without which they cannot be saved, namely, that they "worship One God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity:" I say, when

inconsiderate persons are put in mind of these things, they are apt to say, "It is all a mystery, a secret too high for us; it may be very well for people of learning and leisure, but we cannot understand it, and therefore we have nothing to do with it."

And it is very true, that you cannot understand how those Divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, should be Three, yet One God. You cannot conceive how it should be so: but then the most learned and leisurely person in the world cannot conceive it any better. "Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? " This question of Job may be asked of one man as well as of another, and must receive from all the same answer: "It is as high as heaven: what canst thou do? it is deeper than hell: what canst thou know?"

If, then, your not understanding God's Nature is a reason for your not thinking about it, it is equally a reason to every other man in the world; and all piety, all goodness, towards God, may as well be let alone together.

But the plain truth is, our not understanding the doctrine of Three Persons in One God is not the smallest reason whatever, why we should leave it out of our minds, nor the smallest difficulty whatever, in the way of acting on it.

This may be made plain by a familiar instance. Take that which S. Paul has referred to, and of which many, no doubt, have thought more or less: "That which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die." We put the seed into the ground, dry, dead, and hard as it seems to be, and a fresh living plant springs out of it. Can we at all understand this? Do we know how it takes place? Yet we do not account our ignorance a reason, why we should leave off tilling the earth. Why, then, should the like ignorance, with regard to the manner in which the Three Divine Persons are One only, ever-glorious God; why should our not understanding this be any objection to our religiously remembering it?

Men know not, as the wise man says, how the bones do grow in the womb of her which is with child; but they do not think themselves the less bound to love and honour the mother that gave them birth.

Take it, therefore, for a certain truth, that the Catholic Faith, which you have heard to-day, of Three Persons in One God, to be worshipped, served, and obeyed in all things, this Faith is necessary to the salvation of all alike, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, within whose reach God's providence has set it.

But observe: it must be believed *faithfully*. You must depend on the Son of God as your Redeemer; you must welcome the Holy Spirit as your Comforter, with the same kind of constant feeling wherewith you depend on, and welcome, those

whom you know to be your nearest and dearest friends. This you cannot sincerely do, as long as you wilfully continue in any thing that you know to be sin; for so long the thought of their being present, and watching your very heart, will make you uneasy.

Consider, however, before it be too late, what it must be to reject their witness, or (what comes, in the end, to much the same) to turn carelessly away from it. After all, you must die; and when you die, what pardon, what consolation can you hope for, if you have refused to let your Saviour plead for you to His Father, and hardened your hearts against the Holy Ghost, the Comforter?