

"JUDGMENT AND MERCY"

from

Plain Sermons *On Subjects* *Practical and Prophetic*

by Alexander McCaul

*“And he stood between the dead and the living,
and the plague was stayed.”*
Numbers 16:48

THIS day we are called upon to acknowledge God as the moral Governor of the world, and to recognise Him not only as the future Judge of the quick and dead, but as the actual Disposer of good and evil in this present life; not only as the Controller of the destinies of individuals, but the Divine Ruler of nations; not only as a God afar off, before whom we may one day stand, but a God at hand, who now deals out weal and woe, as His wisdom may direct, or the sins of men require. The great effort of earthly wisdom is to account for every thing either in the course of creation, or the history of man, upon those principles which are called natural; and to represent the immediate interposition of God, not only as unnecessary, but unreasonable.

According to this system the waves of the sea may rise in their fury, and bury men and their habitations beneath the flood; the earth may open her mouth, and swallow thousands in a moment; the winds may descend in their strength, and spread universal desolation over the face of a whole country; the pestilence may walk the circuit of the globe, and fill the world with mourners, and yet all is to be ascribed to some unknown natural cause. Any solution is to be received rather than that which God himself hath given in His most holy word. “I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace, and create evil. I the Lord do all these things.” (Is. xlv. 7.)

The appointment of this day as a day of thanksgiving from a dreadful disease,¹ reminds the nation, and testifies to the world, that there is a God that judgeth in the earth; that it is the Most High that ruleth in the kingdom of men; that He is to be acknowledged as the inflicter and the remover of national visitations. The church conspires with the state to teach us the same lesson. The passage appointed instead of the epistle for the day presents for our consideration a remarkable instance of God’s dealings with nations. We propose, therefore, in dependence upon His help, to consider,

I. THE HISTORY TO WHICH OUR TEXT REFERS. And,

II. THE INSTRUCTION WHICH IT AFFORDS.

The history contains an account of the sin and punishment of Israel, and the means whereby this punishment was removed. “But on the morrow all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses, and against Aaron, saying, Ye have killed the people of the Lord.” (ver. 44.) The sin appears rather venial, than heinous. It was merely a slight ebullition of popular feeling that did no one any harm. The camp of Israel was not at the time defiled with uncleanness, nor stained with the blood of the innocent. It does not appear from the history, that thousands of the daughters of Israel had

¹ Preached on the day of thanksgiving for the removal of the Cholera.

forsaken the guide of their youth, and forgotten the covenant of their God; to lie in wait for the souls of the simple. Nor yet that the sons of Israel were pursuing an organised system of murder. We nowhere read of warehouses of infidel publications, nor public meetings for the propagation of blasphemy. The poor are not charged with idolatry, nor the rich with a wanton profanation of the Sabbath day. The only offence alleged against them is, that they murmured against Moses and Aaron. They were dissatisfied with the government, both in church and state; and they expressed freely the dissatisfaction which they felt. But this murmuring implied the basest ingratitude for past mercies, wilful perversion of the truth for mere party purposes, and direct rebellion against God. They murmured against Moses and Aaron; but Moses and Aaron had been the chosen instruments of their deliverance from Egyptian bondage. The children of Israel were no longer slaves to a foreign power: their male children no longer devoted to destruction; the voice of the task-master no longer heard. They had received an equitable law, whereby arbitrary power was restrained amongst themselves, and justice was administered by men chosen from among their own body. Moses had not arbitrarily appointed the various judges of the people, but had only confirmed their choice.

In Deut. i. 12, we find the words of Moses, "How can I myself alone bear your cumbrance, and your burden, and your strife? Take ye wise men, and understanding, and known among your tribes, and I will make them rulers over you. And ye answered me, and said, The thing which thou hast spoken is good for us to do. So I took the chief of your tribes, wise men, and known, and made them heads over you, captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, and captains over fifties, and captains over tens, and officers among your tribes."

They had also free liberty to worship the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. No Egyptian priesthood could interfere to forbid the worship of the true God, nor to compel their children to become idolaters. The law of God was in their hands, and the ark of God in the midst of them. Religious and civil liberty was now the happy lot of those who had so lately sighed and groaned by reason of the bondage, and Moses and Aaron had been the sole instruments of their deliverance. The people had done nothing towards effecting the happy change: they had engaged in no part of this conflict with the power of Egypt. Moses and Aaron had gone alone to Pharaoh, and had no help in the contest either with the king or his magicians. The people did nothing but receive what Moses and Aaron were commissioned and empowered to bestow. But the memory of past benefits was now effaced; the enjoyment of present privileges forgotten; and the authors of all their good are charged with the wilful murder of those whom they had risked their lives to deliver. Wicked and designing men had persuaded the people, that the existing government was not of God, but that Moses and Aaron had usurped an authority to which they had no right. Private interest and pique was the motive; but public spirit, and defence of the rights of the people, was the pretence. An attack upon the civil authority was hardly possible; as Moses would have been supported by the heads of the tribes: the priesthood therefore is singled out as the object of complaint. The malcontents "gathered themselves together against Moses and Aaron, and said unto them, Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them: wherefore, then, lift you up yourselves above the congregation of the Lord!"

This is the language of men who have no interests of their own to serve, but who feel deeply for the wrongs of their fellow-men. "All the congregation is holy, every one of them." There is, therefore, no possible reason why the power of the priesthood should be confined to the hands of two individuals. Not a member of the congregation, who is not as good, and as holy, and as fit for the office, as Moses and Aaron. Why, then, should they lift up themselves above the congregation of the Lord, and require obedience from those whose natural right to govern is as valid as theirs? Korah, and Dathan, and Abiram, had however no intention of making all the people priests and governors.

There can be little doubt that the sons of Reuben, the first-born of Jacob, looked upon the supreme

power as their national right, as it is certain that Korah intended to transfer the chief priesthood to himself. With this Moses plainly taxed him: "Take ye the priesthood also?" In this, then, the people were amused with fine speeches about their right and their holiness: but if the conspiracy had succeeded, they would have found that their lot was still to be governed; and that they had only cast off their allegiance to their benefactors, to become the slaves of unprincipled and designing men. This attempt did not succeed: God interposed and vindicated the order which he himself had established: the chief movers of the sedition were miraculously destroyed: but the spirit of discontent was not so easily allayed. Some of the party who had not courage enough to stand in open opposition to Moses and Aaron, escaped for the time by their cowardice; and now secretly persuaded the people that the judgment just inflicted upon the guilty was to be considered as a wilful murder effected by Moses and Aaron. They did not dare to appear openly, but their insinuations wrought the desired effect. The people again rose in rebellion, and murmured against Moses and Aaron, saying, "Ye have killed the people of the Lord." Nothing could be more false or malicious. So far from murdering, they had been the means of saving the whole congregation from destruction. "The Lord had said, Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment. And they fell upon their faces, and said, O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and wilt thou be wroth with the whole congregation." Their intercession had delivered the people: the people themselves were too much occupied with their own rights to regard the compassion of man, or the mercy of God.

They were now intent upon redressing grievances, and the hand of God was altogether overlooked. They were determined to have things their own way, and had taken the power into their own hands; they had therefore no mind to consider the will of God. They had seen the earth open, and swallow up the rebellious, but their minds were pre-occupied with their own favourite scheme; it therefore made no impression. As soon as the danger was over, their sense of guilt passed away, and the idea of their wrongs again asserted its pre-eminence;—an awful proof that the surest means of making a nation apostatize from God, is to array them against their rulers, and to fill their mind with indignation against supposed injustice. When this is effected there is no hope. The expostulations of man and the judgments of God will avail nothing. When the children of Israel made the golden calf, they submitted quietly to the punishment. When they were smitten with the plague because of their gluttonous desire of the quails, they did not rebel. When Moses announced to them that the wilderness was to be their grave, they murmured not against him or Aaron. But when their minds were soured by a rebellious and factious spirit, the miraculous destruction of the ringleaders produced no effect. They murmured against Moses and Aaron, and were ready to rebel against God himself.

Nothing but another and merciful infliction could allay the ferment of their spirit. God therefore interposed again: "The Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Get thee up from among this congregation, that I may consume them as in a moment." Wrath went out from the Lord, and the plague began. Instantaneous and appalling death cut down the ranks of the murderers. The foremost in sin were the first in punishment. The plague went forth from the presence of the Lord, and commenced a deadly progress amongst the congregation of Israel. The foremost ranks fell dead, and those that were behind beheld in consternation that destruction rapidly approached. Twelve thousand seven hundred corpses marked the road. But yet the Lord was merciful. Though quick, the progress was gradual. Time was granted for intercession and atonement. And this time Moses and Aaron did not fail to improve. They felt no joy in the destruction of their enemies, and wished for no revenge. "They fell upon their faces, and Moses said to Aaron, Take a censer, and put fire therein from off the altar, and put on incense, and go quickly unto the congregation, and make an atonement for them: for there is wrath gone out from the Lord: the plague is begun. And Aaron took as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the congregation, and he stood between the living and the dead, and the plague was stayed." Aaron had no fear of contagion; he was not to be appalled by the dead or the dying. He was going on a work of mercy; and though he had no particular promise of exemption, he went fearlessly into the regions of

death, well assured that the plague was of the Lord, and could do nothing but what the Lord designed. Thus the people were saved; and so saved, as to see that those whom they looked upon as their enemies were their true friends, and their only deliverers. Such is a short account of the history to which our text refers. We hasten,

II. *To the instruction which it affords ourselves.* This is twofold:—1. Instruction for nations; and 2. For individuals.

1. The history of God's saints in the Old and New Testament exhibits to us the nature of man's heart, and the love of compassion of the Lord to those that fear Him. But if the record of God's dealings with the nation of Israel had not been preserved, we should be at a loss to know the nature of our relation to God as a nation, and could offer but very uncertain conjectures respecting God's government of the world at large. The national history of Israel supplies this deficiency, and teaches the Christian how to judge of the manifold political changes which are related in profane history, and of the alternations of national prosperity and adversity, joy and sorrow, which occur in our own times. God selected a peculiar people, gave them a law, and carefully ordered the history of their sins and their sorrows, their obedience and their prosperity, to be recorded, that he might teach all other nations the true mode of legislation, and the true secret of national prosperity. And though I am sure that the Mosaic law was never intended for any nation but the Jews, I am equally convinced that no nation can have the blessing of God; that is, that no nation can prosper, whose policy is not founded upon the principles contained therein, and illustrated by the light of the New Testament.

The first national lesson taught us this day is, that National sins are visited with national judgments.—In the case of Israel no one can doubt it. From the moment of their entrance into the wilderness unto this hour of their present dispersion, they have been living witnesses of this great truth. Every species of calamity with which that nation was ever visited is ascribed to their sins as a nation. Defeat, famine, pestilence, foreign invasion, dismemberment of the empire, final expulsion, are all recognized as the consequences of national sin. Sometimes, as in the history considered, the sins of the people, sometimes the sins of the priests, sometimes the sins of the kings, were the immediate cause of the visitation; but whoever sinned, national judgments were the consequence. In 1 Sam. iv. we read of a dreadful defeat of the armies of Israel. The Philistines triumphed, and the ark of God was taken. The sons of Eli the priest were the cause; they had made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. (2 Sam. xxi.) “There was a famine in the days of David three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites.” The guilt of unpunished murder was upon the land, and famine was the consequence. In the reign of David 70,000 of the people were carried off by the pestilence. The cause is also assigned. “Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number the people. Therefore the Lord's anger was kindled.” The once flourishing kingdom of Israel was divided. Ten of the tribes revolted, and set up a separate government. Solomon's idolatry was the cause. Foreign enemies overran the land of Israel, and at last led them away captive. The rise of other and mightier nations is not assigned as the reason, but the sins of the whole nation. “The king stiffened his neck, and hardened his heart from turning unto the God of Israel. Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much, after all the abominations of the heathen, and polluted the house of the Lord which he had hallowed in Jerusalem. And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes and sending them; but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy. Therefore he brought upon them the king of the Chaldees, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man or him that stooped for age: he gave them all into his hand.” From these passages it is proved beyond all doubt that the national sins of Israel were punished by national judgments.

But the question remains, whether it be fair to make a general rule from one particular case? The

nation of Israel was under a particular dispensation, and their national circumstances were so peculiar as to make a great difference between them and all the other nations of the earth. It will therefore be well to consider the dealings of God towards the other nations and families of the earth. Not now to notice the deluge, we find that the Lord's eyes are ever open, beholding the evil and the good, and that family and national sins are ever attended with family and national judgments. After the flood, the first great public sin was the attempt to build the tower of Babel. God immediately visited it with a public testimony of his displeasure, which remains to this our day and generation, as a witness of this great truth. He confounded the language of the children of men, and we their posterity still bear the punishment inflicted on our forefathers. Long before the giving of the law, we find God watching the progress of iniquity amongst the inhabitants of Canaan, and deferring the punishment of extirpation until they should have filled up the measure of their iniquities. He assigns to Abraham, as a reason why his posterity should not get immediate possession: "The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full." And in the law the Israelites are particularly warned not to fall into the same sins, lest they should meet the same punishment. "Defile not you yourselves in any of these things: for in all these the nations are defiled which I cast out before you: and the land is defiled: therefore I do visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and the land itself vomiteth out her inhabitants." (Levit. xviii. 24.) This passage fully proves that the rule of God's dealings is not peculiar towards the Jewish nation, but that He applies to them a rule which He had in his infinite wisdom already laid down and acted upon. It is therefore unnecessary to refer to Sodom, Egypt, Edom, Ammon, Moab, Assyria, Babylon, Tyre, and other nations whose national ruin is in Scripture expressly ascribed to their national sin. The testimony of the Old Testament is complete; the only question that can remain is whether the New Testament warrants the same conclusion.

It is thought by some, that the Christian dispensation is so different from the Jewish, that we cannot infer from what happened under the former, to what happens under the latter. This principle I hold to be only one, and perhaps the most insidious, form of infidelity. It is nothing better than a compendious method of invalidating the greater part of the word of God. But as some Christians have been beguiled by it, I shall endeavour to shew that the New Testament distinctly recognizes the same principle. The Apostle Paul expressly argues from the national judgments upon Israel, as premises; and thence concludes, that if we, under the New Testament, are guilty of the same sins, we must expect the same punishment. In 1 Cor. x. 6, he says, "Now these things were our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three-and-twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."

Here St. Paul expressly warrants the conclusion which we have already drawn from the text, and distinctly states that God's rule of moral government under the New Testament is not different from that under the Old, but one and the same. Our Lord also distinctly recognises the same principle. Against the disobedient cities He denounces a temporal woe, as well as an eternal judgment, "Woe unto thee, Chorazin; woe unto thee, Bethsaida; for if the mighty works which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained unto this day." If more evidence were necessary, it is afforded by the present, and still continued, dispersion of the Jews.² Their city and temple were destroyed, because they knew not the day of their visitation; and they have been providentially scattered through every nation of the earth, that they might bear witness to all that national sins are punished by national judgments. Though ignorant of Christ, they preach in language

² Alexander McCaul wrote in 1840.

not to be misunderstood, that "Christ rules the nations with a rod of iron, and will dash to pieces the disobedient like a potter's vessel." And, though unbelieving themselves, they seem to cry in the loud voice of warning, "Be wise now, therefore, O ye kings; be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little." Such is the unvarying doctrine of the word of God. We are taught both in the Old and New Testament, that it is with a living God that we have to do. He is not like the gods of the heathen, "Who cannot do good, neither is it in them to do evil." He is the living Governor of the world, who rules kings and nations, who sends a scourge in his wrath, and removes it in the multitude of his mercies. Such was the doctrine of our Reformers, as they have recorded it in the collects to be used in times of famine, scarcity of rain, the plague, or any time of common sickness; and such I am thankful to say is the lesson taught us to-day both by Church and State.

In the appointment of this day as a day of thanksgiving, as well as in the form of prayer appointed to be used, the dreadful disease with which we were lately visited is distinctly recognised a visitation of God, and the removal of it ascribed solely to his mercy. In the collect appointed for the day we read these words, "Almighty God, our Father and Judge, who hast lately visited our land with grievous sickness and mortality, yet in compassion to the frailty of our nature hast graciously relieved our anxieties, and comforted our sorrows, by withdrawing thy scourge from us; we most humbly beseech Thee to accept our praises and thanksgivings for this Thy merciful kindness." And again, page 5, "We humbly acknowledge Thy power and goodness in staying the course of the pestilence, when we had no hope in men. To Thee alone we ascribe our deliverance: in Thee only do we trust." This nation has therefore no excuse. The highest authority in the land proclaims this day, that national sins are visited with national judgments. The occasion is particular, but the truth is general. Sin was the cause of all the terror and distress which a deadly disease spread through the land. Sin is the cause of every other evil with which the nation is afflicted. In vain do the political economists look for any other cause of the poverty and distress, stagnation of trade, and want of employment, which form the subject of general complaint. To ascribe it to a superabundant population is nothing short of blasphemy against God. Increase of population is a positive blessing. Sin, sin alone, is the cause of national calamity: and repentance is the only means of restoring prosperity. Our statesmen may form the wisest plans, and pursue the course of policy they think best; but unless the nation repent, it must perish. The people may effect great and mighty changes in the legislature, in the church, in the form of government; but unless they repent they perish.

Be not deceived, beloved brethren, there is but one remedy for national affliction. It is national repentance, and national prayer. Each of the various parties into which the nation is split, pretends to have a cure for all evils: believe not any—they are all false Prophets. No political change can effect a deviation from the rule of God's judgment. If God himself were to give us a perfect system of legislation and policy, it could effect nothing without repentance. As long as the nation continues in sin and rebellion against God, misery and distress and confusion must be our portion. I rejoiced in the appointment of a day of humiliation last year, and I am truly thankful for this day of thanksgiving and public acknowledgment of God's mercies; but I do not believe that they are in themselves sufficient to avert the wrath of God. Every species of sin abounds in the land. Impurity, murder, drunkenness, profanation of the Lord's Day, are so common as to excite no surprise, and but little disgust. The nation is familiarized with crime. The public press speaks evil of, and respects not, the highest offices of the State. Blasphemy is vended publicly and securely in every quarter of this metropolis. The ministers of religion are in every possible way held up to scorn and contempt. The days appointed by the Church for humiliation and fasting are but little observed. Spiritual authority is almost entirely disregarded. A single day of humiliation or thanksgiving is not sufficient to atone for these sins, and can do nothing towards removing them. What then is to be done? Is the help of the legislature to be sought? Are more petitions to be sent to Parliament? No, this is the delusion the present day. The Church, as well as the world, has got a compendious mode of compensating for the neglect of individual duties. If

anything be amiss, an application must be made to the legislature. Men sign their name to a piece of paper; and then think as little of prayer, humiliation, and repentance, as they did before.

[2.] The text affords instruction not only to nations but to individuals. When the wrath went out from the Lord, Moses and Aaron fell upon their faces to intercede for the nation. Aaron stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stayed.” Only two individuals knew the danger of the nation, but they two were sufficient to save it from destruction. The plague had actually begun. The wrath of the Lord had broken out upon the people. There was no time to preach repentance,—no time for expostulation,—no time for fasting. But it was not too late for prayer. They prayed, and prayer saved the nation. What a lesson to all those who know how to pray in the all prevailing name of the Lord Jesus Christ! What comfort to all those who desire the prosperity of the nation! There is a remedy as simple as it is effectual. Your petitions to men may remain unheeded; and even if attended to may bring no good.

To change men’s hearts is altogether beyond the power of kings and statesmen, but not beyond the power of prayer. The prayer of faith has the promise of omnipotence: “Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father, which is in heaven.” “Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask *anything* in my name I will do it.” This then is the remedy which I propose for the national distress, and for the averting of God’s wrath and indignation, earnest and believing prayer,—private and public prayer. Without this all other remedies are folly and delusion. Waste not the precious moments in discussing plans, or advocating the claims of particular parties. If you wish to be a true and efficient patriot and benefactor of your country, go into your closet, and shut the door after you, and pray to Him that seeth in secret. Confess your own sins and the sins of the nation, and call upon him who is exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour to bestow upon this nation repentance and remission of sins. If you find leisure for more than this, then spend it in calling upon others to do the same. To ministers and people I would propose the example of Moses and Aaron. I am fully persuaded that until a spirit of prayer is poured out upon God’s believing people, nothing can be done to promote the peace and prosperity of the nation. Until men spend much time in private intercession, and until the churches and chapels of this land are opened every morning and evening, and filled with a praying people, I can look for nothing but a continuance of judgments and distress.