

The Inheritance
of our Fathers

A Sermon

by

The Very Reverend P. D. THOMSON, D.D.

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Preached in Glasgow Cathedral
on Sunday, 19th October, 1941,
at the Annual Visit of the
Deacon-Convener and Members
of The Trades House of Glasgow

BY

The Very Reverend P. D. THOMSON, D.D.

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the Collector and the Late Convener

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To

THE DEACON-CONVENER, THE COLLECTOR,
AND MEMBERS OF THE TRADES HOUSE OF GLASGOW

AND TO

THE FOURTEEN INCORPORATIONS
IN GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THEIR
GRACIOUS REQUEST

THIS SERMON IS DEDICATED

The Inheritance of Our Fathers

And Naboth said unto Ahab, "The Lord forbid it me that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee."
1st Kings xxi. Verse 3.

Scripture Lessons

THE DEACON-CONVENER READ THE
SCRIPTURE LESSONS AS FOLLOWS :—

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON :—FIRST BOOK OF
KINGS, CHAPTER XXI, VERSES 1-16.

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON :—FIRST BOOK OF
PETER, CHAPTER II, VERSES 1-12.

HERE was a man who took his stand upon a great principle. The principle was that he was the steward or trustee of the inheritance of his fathers, and that therefore he must be loyal to his trust. To begin with, that was the law of the land ; and in the circumstances it was a wise law, and even a divine law. Every family in Israel had its own share of the soil, its own stake in the land and in the national life ; and it was forbidden to any holder of it for the time being to dispose of it in his own interest, and so to deprive future generations of their right to possess and to enjoy it. At that time, Israel was a purely agricultural people. It lived by the land. You can see, then, how imperative it was for the national well-being that every family should have its own share in the soil and its own sure means of livelihood. It was, in short, not merely a personal but a family and even a social inheritance. He who held it for the time being held it as a sacred trust. It was passed to him from his fathers : it must pass in turn from him to his children. And so, said Naboth to Ahab, "The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee."

But his vineyard was more to Naboth than a sacred family and social trust. It was also a very precious personal possession. That old vineyard was very dear to him. He knew and loved every inch of it, every vine that drew strength and sweetness from its fertile soil. The very look of it in the morning and at the going down of the sun was a delight to his eye and to his heart. It had been but a rough piece of ground when it was taken over by the founder of his family, that stout soldier and settler who had helped Joshua to conquer and then to cultivate the Promised Land. Generations of his forefathers had laboured to make it the thing of beauty and fruitfulness it had now come to be. They had put their joy and their pride and their hopes and their dreams into it; yes, and their toil and their sweat, and at times their tears and their blood and their life as well. And now all that had come into his hands—the inheritance of his fathers, a fair domain, a goodly heritage, a sacred trust. Moreover, he too had put into it his own pride and joy and love and hopes and dreams, his own toil and sweat and strength of body and spirit. Was it any wonder that the vineyard entwined itself around his heart as with the tendrils of the vines themselves? Was it any wonder that he loved it as part of his very life? And was it any wonder that he said to Ahab, “The Lord forbid it me that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee”?

That, however, was not all. It meant to him even more than that. It was the symbol also of

the faith of his fathers, of their religious faith, and of the whole way of life which that faith had created, and which it alone could sustain. It was the symbol, in short, of the finest convictions and ideals and traditions of his race. For Israel, as you know, was the Vineyard of the Lord, and it was the will of the Lord for Israel that it should be a fruitful Vine blessing all other nations, just as it was His will that Israel and all other nations should sit down, every man under his own vine and fig tree, and that none should make them afraid. Naboth's vineyard stood to him for all that. It embodied for him the faith and the ideals and the traditions of his fathers—their deepest convictions, and their whole way of life. And so, when Ahab came to him and said: “Give me your vineyard to be part of my royal garden, and I will give you a better vineyard for it,” all that was staunch and loyal in Naboth's heart rose up and said: “No!” and when Ahab persisted, and said: “Well then, if you prefer it, I will give you the worth of it in money. What is it worth to you? Name your own price!” you can almost hear Naboth's voice vibrating with anger and scorn, as he made his firm and final refusal: “The Lord forbid it me that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee.”

All that is the inheritance of our fathers too. Every one of us can sing, with as much pride and thankfulness as the psalmist:—

“The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places,
Yea, I have a goodly heritage.”

What is it, this inheritance of our fathers? Well, it consists of this dear land, for which our fathers fought and died in a thousand battles; which they redeemed, at what a costly sacrifice no man will ever know, from the waste and from the wild and from the beast; upon which during countless generations they lavished the strength and skill of mind and heart and hand; and for whose soul patriots and prophets and poets, and not least pioneers for Christ and missionaries of His Cross, toiled and travailed in every age, so that it has become, not merely to us who love it, but to the whole world, a delectable land, even as a garden of the Lord.

“ Land of brown heath and shaggy wood,
Land of the mountain and the flood,
Land of my sires! what mortal hand
Can ere untie the filial band
That knits me to thy rugged strand? ”

The inheritance of our Fathers consists of our land.

It consists, too, of our national and social institutions, and foremost among them the Church of our fathers, a Church in every parish, many of them gems of art and of devotion, not to speak of shrines beyond number, thick-studded and far-flung, so that we can hardly set foot on any spot in our favoured land that is not holy ground. It consists of our Houses of Parliament, and of our incorruptible Courts of Justice, and of our Merchants' Houses and our Trades Houses with their

centuries-old records of honest workmanship, and enterprises in the ends of the earth, and the development of waste-lands, and the tutoring of backward peoples, and a noble philanthropy; aye, and of our Trade Unions too, with their long and uphill fight for the betterment of conditions and for decent standards of life. Add to these our Universities and seats of learning, our national system of education, our care of the poor, our voluntary hospitals, our charitable agencies—all of which, by the way, are not merely national and social institutions but products of the Christian spirit—and tell me whether the inheritance of our fathers in the institutions they founded is not one of the noblest upon earth.

It is more even than all that. It consists also of our national ideals and traditions. I do not say that these ideals and traditions are all that we should like them to be. I do not claim that they are above criticism or beyond reproach. Among the national sins with which we have been charged by other nations are our pride and arrogance, our greed and avarice, our commercial spirit in the baser meaning of that word, and our religious hypocrisy. Such charges may be partly due to jealousy, and they may be exaggerated; but outsiders proverbially see most of the game, and we were foolish not to examine such charges seriously, face up to what measure of truth there may be in them, and amend our ways accordingly. One national sin to which we must plead guilty, if we have any moral insight at all, is our inordinate

worship and pursuit of material wealth. We ought not to be above learning even from our enemies, and when they sneer and jibe at us as "plutocratic democracies" there is just enough truth in their jibe to make an honest conscience uneasy. As a nation, we are just near enough akin to Ahab with his commercialism, and his profusion and display of wealth, and his schemes of personal and national aggrandisement, to make us pause and say: "The Lord forbid it me that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee."

For our national ideals and traditions, even if they may not be beyond reproach, and even if we have been unfaithful to them, are by far the noblest part of the inheritance of our fathers. We have inherited from them ideals and traditions of faith and freedom, of justice and fair-dealing and fair play, of truth and reverence for truth, of the rights of conscience, of consideration for and championship of the weak, and of sportmanship which is just the modern name for the fine old knightly spirit of chivalry. Ideals and traditions, too, of sturdy independence, of the worth of man as man, of the sanctity of the home, of the pricelessness of learning, of high thinking and plain living, and not least of the glory of sacrifice for these and all such-like ideals. And here is the characteristic note, here is the distinguishing mark, of our national ideals and traditions and heroisms, that they have all without exception a Christian origin and inspiration. They have all been derived from and nurtured by the Christian faith and the

Christian Church. In a word, they are Christian ideals and Christian traditions, and the inheritance of our fathers is a Christian heritage. It is in this sense that we are a Christian nation. Oh! I know how far we have fallen short, and are falling short to-day. I know how far we have fallen away from the Christian convictions and traditions of our fathers, how many tens of thousands of our countrymen have abjured the Christian faith, how many of them are indifferent to it, and how many more are but half-convinced and half-hearted Christians at the best. Nevertheless, there must be surely few of us who are not proud that the inheritance of our fathers is a distinctly Christian inheritance; and who, if only they realised that our national ideals and traditions are so rooted and grounded in the Christian faith and the Christian way of life that without it they cannot survive, would not themselves become convinced and thorough-going Christians.

However that may be, we are being tempted and tested to-day at this very point, even as Naboth was. Powers have arisen in the world, going far beyond Ahab, alike in their schemes of aggrandisement and in their wickedness, who covet the inheritance of our fathers. They wanted to strike a bargain with us, whereby we should have retained our inheritance for a season, until their nefarious plans were sufficiently advanced to enable them to take it over; and, when their bargaining failed, they are following Ahab's example in trying to wrest it from us by lying

propaganda and the perversion of justice, by the use of threat and terror and over-powering force. Well, there could be but one answer whether to their blandishment or to their frightfulness, and the answer has been given. This whole people has risen up as one man, and spoken like stout-hearted Naboth: "The Lord forbid it that we should give the inheritance of our fathers unto thee."

Yes, but what does it avail, to fight to the death for our inheritance by sea, and land, and in the air, at a cost and at a sacrifice which no man can measure, if at the same time we are letting it slip through our fingers in other ways? That is what we are doing. Who would venture to say, for example, that we are maintaining the high standards of our fathers in respect of the sanctity of our home and family-life? An attack has been made upon the Christian ideal of the home, to which we have in no small measure succumbed. The loosening of family ties, the weakening of family fidelities, the renouncing of family obligations, and the throwing off of family disciplines are sad and sinister signs of the times. The Christian ideal of marriage and the home is that a man and a woman should love each other and cleave to each other only, that they should bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and that they should make their home both to themselves and to their children the loveliest place on earth. Isn't that what you parents wish and pray for your children when they

come to be married? and isn't that the dream you young people cherish for yourselves? Well, it just can't be done unless you dedicate yourselves and your love and your home and your children to the love and service of God. Family-religion—that is the secret of it. Our fathers left us that for our inheritance, and we are letting it slip through our fingers.

Again, are there not many among us to-day who are surrendering their religious convictions and observances, and with them their basic moral standards and ideals. They are sitting loose to the faith and to the ordinances of the faith. They are forsaking the public worship of God, and the gracious influences and inspirations of the Lord's Day; and they are neglecting and renouncing other great Christian obligations — national religion as well as personal and family religion, the evangelization of Scotland, and with that the evangelization of the whole world. They are belittling and neglecting all that; and yet they think to retain their Vineyard, to possess and enjoy the inheritance of their fathers. What egregious folly! For these things are the very heart and soul of that inheritance. They are the source from which all our other gifts and blessings have sprung, and they are the citadel by which alone our inheritance as a whole can be preserved and secured. Do you wonder that, with the weakening of our religious convictions and the neglect of our religious obligations, our moral standards also are crumbling, and our moral ideals

become dimmed? And do you think that we can hold on for long to our freedom, and our passion for righteousness, and our sense of honour, and our reverence for truth, and our place and privilege and power as a nation, and our high calling of God to sail the seven seas and weave main to main and act as trustees for the backward peoples of the earth, if we cut ourselves adrift from those inspirations and disciplines which have made the inheritance of our fathers the glorious heritage it is, and which alone can make us worthy of it and of them?

I call upon you, then, in this day of temptation and testing, when we are fighting the grimmest battle in all our history to maintain and to preserve the inheritance of our fathers, not for ourselves alone, but that we may share it with all the world, to realise that it is essentially a Christian heritage, and that we can only be loyal to it as we are personally and staunchly loyal to Christ. It is a grand thing that we are standing up to the dictator-powers, and defying them to take the inheritance of our fathers from us; but it would be even grander if we highly resolved, here and now, to maintain and to enhance its Christian character. It came by Christ, and only by loyalty to Christ can it be held. And so I call upon you further to vow this vow with me: "Oh! Ahab, be thou tyrant or tempter, assailing me from without or seducing me from within, the Lord forbid it me that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee."!